

## Recreating Ballybeg: Two Translations by Brian Friel

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Six years ago, Seamus Heaney wrote: "Brian Friel has by now produced a more significant body of work than any other playwright in Ireland; and it is time that he was, as it were, translated."<sup>1</sup> What follows is an effort to, in part, respond to that need. Friel is himself a translator, reinterpreting real and imagined aspects of Ireland's past and present in the literary form most appropriate to his task. His choice of the stage over the static page allows him to pull the kind of activity out of language that the poet Heaney calls for when he says in *Field Work*: "I ate the day/ Deliberately, that its tang/ Might quicken me into verb, pure verb."<sup>2</sup> The political oppression which informs language in Ireland divides descriptive nouns, or signifiers, from the land and culture they are intended to signify, positing a tangible space into any description of the country and its natives. The practicable nature of drama which might quicken into "pure verb" both outlines this space separating words and their significance and provides gestures to fill it with. Each of Friel's characters inhabits this space of betrayed meaning, a space that empties them of self-proclaimed identity. They enact the loss of self-descriptive power as well as the knowledge that once the self is defined in terms of a new and imposed authority, it can never be regained. What interests Friel is a particular problem of translation: the relation of language to history in a people whose history has recorded the replacement of one language for another.

All political relations, be they colonial, sexual, or familial, are established first in language: those who do not have the power of naming are reduced to Other, and deprived of the authority to name themselves. "Irishness" has for generations been described in English terms and is today an unresolvable tangle of folklore and sensational newspaper headlines, but for Friel this

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mixed identity is less a cultural tragedy than a complicated dimension of his Irish characters' personalities. They must assimilate their position of Other, or outsider in their homeland with a search for identity undertaken in terms of family history, which the playwright makes emblematic of Ireland's search for nationality. All history, personal and cultural, is transformed as it gets written: what is remembered is not always what happened, and because history's actors are rarely its writers, memory does not always conform to the written page. Nations embellish their pasts for posterity just as individuals do, but embellishment becomes dangerous when it too seductively obscures irreversible historical fact. Ireland's myth of compensation may be richer than its past of dispossession, yet while language creates lies, it is also the best tool for unmasking them. Friel treats cultural myth as both product and producer of his characters' psychological myths; by illustrating Ireland in this way he universalizes it, since all of our histories have been imposed on us by someone other than ourselves.

Only one of Friel's plays, *The Freedom of the City* (published 1974), specifically concerns the Irish war of unification, but the war appears in one way or another in all of his work. The call for self-determination has always led to bloodshed and Friel insists that his audience recognize that Ireland's efforts to cope with betrayal are as personal as they are national, and thus are not limited to that nation alone. Everyone is misinformed by memory—identity is accomplished through a recognition and reinterpretation of the ambiguity inherent in history, and of course language. Friel's characters are victims of their own and Ireland's memory, and their effort to encode this memory into the present. The protagonist of *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1967) is a young Ballybeg man who has decided to emigrate to America. Represented by two actors, the "private" and "public" self, he enacts the split desire for change tempered by nostalgia; he must choose whether to write his own history or remain within the static confines of his hometown and homeland. Similarly, in *The Enemy Within* (1975), the Irish abbot of a remote monastery in the Hebrides is torn between his relation to his quarrelling family on the mainland and his relation to God, a god to whom his "pre-Christian" relatives have not yet succumbed. He is reluctantly seduced back to Ireland again and again to settle the petty feuds of the descendants of kings which are crippling his homeland, endangering both the stability of his monastery and the faith it represents. *Faith Healer* (1980) is a more subtle examination of voluntary exile. An itinerant miracle worker—part charlatan, part messiah—returns to Ireland after a lifetime spent escaping it, to face his own murder. Friel's bleakest work, the play is a series of monologues prefacing the finale which the audience hears about without witnessing; a ritualistic sacrifice of the faith healer whose high priest is somehow Ireland itself. *Volunteers* (1979) also intimates at an offstage murder of the play's main characters by their fellow IRA prisoners. The convicts we meet are working on a Dublin archeological dig which is interrupted by the unseen powers above (a professor King) and the beginning of hotel construction on the site. That the "volunteers" have betrayed their fellow revolutionaries by accepting a job on the outside becomes clear as they prepare to return to prison, but so does the suspicion that their revolutionary integrity has suffered as much from the movement as it has from

being imprisoned. The reality of the IRA's activity, like the motives for the archeological dig, does not parallel the patriotic words used to describe it. The exiled convicts, like the exiled faith healer, holy man, and aspiring emigrant, must face their disillusionment with Ireland's myth of self-description. Patriotism is complicated in a land whose colonial battles have waged as long as Ireland's have; and Friel suggests that people must describe themselves outside of the dialogue of nationalist politics before partaking in it. Personal history is never wholly divided from the history of the patria, but neither is it identical to it. Friel's stage represents a space where the problematic words defining these histories are translated into action, action which, once performed and witnessed, is never reducible to words alone.

The Irish people's task of self-description is central to Friel's major work, especially *Aristocrats* (1980) and *Translations* (1981). In these plays he recreates an evolving Ireland using the microcosm of Ballybeg village in County Donegal, which, like Thornton Wilder's *Grovers Corners*, is a distinct character with all the attributes of a nation composed of thousands like it. A hometown and a home, Ballybeg is regarded with love and resentment, nostalgia and pessimism, because it must be escaped to be understood. Not to leave home is not to grow up—coming of age demands a certain historicizing in which memory and the recognition of who articulates memory is admitted and then surmounted. Ballybeg is the Ireland which Friel's characters must leave to realize themselves, and this realization occurs through a process of translation. Translation risks some loss of the original, some betrayal of the truth, but it is better than stagnating in childhood. Once learned, the language of power can be spoken by the less powerful and used to define not only the process of domination—its history—but a positive process of growth as well. Friel's Ballybeg is the setting for a reunion of the surviving members of the region's only monied family. The house not only symbolizes an outmoded way of life, but also the outmoded perceptions of contemporary reality shared by all of its inhabitants. Like Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, *Aristocrats* is a "plotless" drama-of-place, one that examines the relationship between characters as well as the symbolic setting to which they are confined. The O'Donnell family that grew up in Ballybeg come together for the wedding of the next-to-youngest daughter, Claire, who with Judith, Uncle George, and the senile yet domineering father, are the only heirs remaining at home. The single son Casimir arrives from Germany and the eldest daughter Alice and her husband Eamon from London. Despite their geographical separation, the focus for all of their lives, both remembered and performed during the play, is the house itself. Its physical decay is symptomatic of a more pervasive disintegration which by the play's end will be displayed for what it is—a necessary step on the path to self-description. Father dies of shock in the second act and his funeral, superimposed on the wedding, serves as liberation, finale, and beginning for the other characters. The estate is abandoned by the family and thus the hall, their childhoods, and Ballybeg's aristocratic past begin to exist where they belong, in a closed history which, while remembered, is not allowed to overwhelm the present.

Although the story is about the family and their illusions, the play opens with two characters both outside and dependent upon these family myths.

Willie, the hall's volunteer custodian, does all he can to keep the place from crumbling apart. His charitable handyman's work is motivated by nostalgia for a defunct, but attractive social order that no longer sets political rules for the local community to live by. At the outset of the play he is fixing an intercom system to the wall—superficially modernizing—while Tom, an American academic researching Ballybeg Hall, scribbles notes on the O'Donnell heritage. He and Willie are outsiders appreciative but not envious of their hosts' eccentricity, performing both a parasitic and an interpretive role. Willie's version of the past is sentimental while Tom's is supposedly objective scholarship, but they are equally fictitious recreations of the truth.

The past appears onstage in the person of George, the oldest representative of the family and its once noble home. His presence is a silent one; like the house he is fixed in time past and demands nothing of the present. But Uncle George embodies optimism at the play's conclusion, because with only a few words he can actively respond to those who love him. Speech for him is superfluous and thus he escapes the misinterpretation that all speaking subjects risk; he knows without saying that his simple gestures are empowered by their wordlessness. For Father, however, a stroke victim confined to his bed, speech is an unnatural and unexpected, but indispensable mechanism. Verbal communication happens spontaneously, free of time, but Friel manipulates speech in ways that enslave words, even declarations of power, to a doubtful past. Father is connected by Willie's intercom to the house and his children (none of whom he recognizes), but the machine betrays meaning because Father's words are incoherent statements from his enfeebled memory. The box occasionally interrupts the dialogue as the old man unconsciously reasserts his imperial will merely by remembering aloud; for example: "Casimir! Come to the library at once . . . at once, Sir. And bring that headmaster's report with you,"<sup>3</sup> or "Judith betrayed the family—did you know that? Great betrayal, enormous betrayal . . . but Anna's praying for her" (50). Disembodied voices emanating from machines—the intercom, the telephone, or a taperecorder—are a source of comedy as well as discomfort as they force a distorted history into the present. A voice from the past is the only child whom Father remembers, the daughter he has not seen in twenty years. Anna, known as Sister John Henry, sends the family a recorded message from her missionary post in Africa, where she enacts yet another version of the imperialist project by taping, or capturing her African charges intoning English church songs. Father mistakes his favorite daughter's voice on the machine for her presence and the shock of recognition kills him. His death forces his children to reconsider their relationship to him and their childhoods in Ballybeg. They have all attempted to escape the solitude and villagers' mocking that defined the "royal family," but insist upon guarding certain relics of their unusual common past.

Casimir has been the most victimized by the family history. But even after the paternal influence has been buried in the third act, it remains unclear how much of Casimir's elusive strangeness is due to his father or to the house.

CASIMIR—I remember the day he [Father] said to me: "Had you been born down there"—we were in the library and he pointed down to Ballybeg—" . . . you'd have become the village idiot. Fortunately

for you, you were born here and we can absorb you." Ha-ha . . .  
somehow the hall doesn't exist without him. (69-70)

The hall has been a shield against the truth for all of them, protecting them from the town and from Ireland. Living as aristocrats in the twentieth century placed the O'Donnells conveniently out of history, and Friel analogizes their confusion between the hall's myth and their lives' facts to Ireland's uncertainty in naming itself. Casimir was allowed to remain childish because his inherited name defined him in the same way nations often hide behind their dead heroes. Isolated from the world surrounding Ballybeg Hall, intimidated by the heritage that burdens him, Casimir insists upon a romanticized version of his past. He wishes for, but cannot carry off, the instinctive disregard for truth that his mother survived under. She called "anything great and romantic and exciting that had happened in the past or might happen in the future . . . a 'party in Vienna'" (66), but we learn that the strain of these "parties" led to her suicide. Like his mother, Casimir is desperate to make Ballybeg Hall a paradise that defies the facts of Father's tyranny, especially for the history book that Professor Tom is writing. Casimir glibly christens the furniture in Tom's study with imagined significance: the G.K. Chesterton footstool, the Daniel O'Connell chaise lounge, the armchair with Gerard Manley Hopkins' tea stain, and the Yeats cushion which the poet sat on for three nights waiting for a ghost. Casimir remembers these monumental ghosts vividly, whether he was born during their lifetimes or not, exposing his memory as a subject less fitting to scholarship than to poetry.

The entire clan and their generic memory is the same. Tom's interruptions into their reminiscing remind us that he and they are working at cross-purposes in historicizing Ballybeg. The professor's research in entitled "Recurring cultural, political, and social modes in the upper strata of Roman Catholic society in rural Ireland since the act of Catholic emancipation" (23), an aptly superlative ivory tower label which reflects an American view of the Irish as an innately tragic and politically engaged people. Attempting to categorize Ballybeg Hall as an objectifiable "mode" would be successful only through a romantic misinterpretation of the real insulation that it fosters. As a home and a way of life, the hall has survived only through its capacity to deny historical fact; i.e., the "cultural, political, and social" dimensions of Ireland. In answer to Tom's question about Father's relation to the civil rights campaign, Alice replies:

He opposed it. No, that's not accurate. He was indifferent; that was across the border—away in the North.

TOM—Only twenty miles away.

ALICE—Politics never interested him. Politics are vulgar.

TOM—And Judith? What was her attitude? Was she engaged?

ALICE—She took part in the Battle of the Godside. Left Father and Uncle George and Claire alone here and joined the people in the streets fighting the police. That's an attitude, isn't it? . . . And seven months later she had a baby by a Dutch reporter. Does that constitute sufficient engagement? (30-31)

Judith's "engagement" meant betrayal to her father because she had broken the bonds of Ballybeg, not just O'Donnell decency, by venturing outside the

hall's definition of political obligation. To remain a myth in and of itself, Ballybeg Hall could never admit its environs or their importance in the international scene; it could never accept a definition other than its own.

Alice's husband, Eamon, who like Willie was born in Ballybeg village, views the hall with a mixture of condescension and awe. He remarks about the study: "Like walking through Madame Tussaud's, isn't it, Professor. Or a bloody minefield" (32). At any moment a fragment of memorabilia might explode and render their lives less than believable. No family history can be safely scrutinized, especially when imposed upon by a present-day reality as incredible as Ireland's systematic violence. Every character in *Aristocrats* wears eccentricity like armor; as initiates into the hall they set aside normal expectations of cause and effect to protect themselves from the effect of what is going on "out there." Most of the play's effects come from artificial devices, modern technology out of place in the memory factory of Ballybeg and out of sync with the family's perception of itself, but these devices may be no more artificial than the language used to cope with them. Machines, like history, are not supposed to lie, but they can jarringly rearrange an already uncertain distinction between artifice and reality. Casimir tries to clarify that distinction by asking several times: "All that happened, didn't it?" We know that he really is not sure, mired as he is in his fanciful embellishments of boyhood facts he would rather forget.

Casimir's uncertainty sounds the final note for the play. The funeral over and Claire's wedding postponed, everyone prepares to leave Ballybeg in Judith's hands, since she has always served as its faithful superintendent. Now she is tired of her domestic duties and more pointedly of the Ballybeg village world she has been excluded from since birth. She knows that the symbolic role her ancestors once performed as the keepers of an ancient social order is no longer relevant. The script is dusty and full of holes, as Tom has innocently yet ruthlessly proven by trying to historicize it. And so the family bequeaths the mansion to Ballybeg, to be, as Eamon predicts, ridiculed and looted by the townspeople. Alice completes the story with a gesture of optimism by inviting Uncle George to live with her and Eamon in London, an invitation the old man responds to with his only words in the play: "Haven't been to London since . . . the week Edward the Seventh died . . . Another visit's about due, I suppose. I'll pack" (81). This act will make him their keepsake, their living memory linking past and present through blood and affection, both of which are thicker than language.

The foreign historian thus becomes the keeper of the Ballybeg myth; whether he will succeed in translating it to the written page is questionable. Tom wanted to connect the hall and its inmates to the story of Ireland, but his sojourn there has been inconclusive. The characters most adamant in pressing Judith to preserve the estate are, finally, the outsiders who love it because it has not manufactured their lives. Eamon says:

Don't you know that all that is fawning and forelock-touching and Paddy and shabby and greasy peasant in the Irish character finds a house like this irresistible? That's why we were ideal for colonizing. Something in us needs this . . . aspiration. (78)

The ugly side of the Irish character desires a legend of artificial order and respectability, of doting and foolish parents who ignore in which direction their children are growing. What is missing from the O'Donnell family name is an active recognition of what it means to be independent, a recognition which Friel indicates must begin with an examination of what it means to be Irish and colonized. *Aristocrats'* characters have tried to grow up by leaving not only their father and the oppressive mansion, but Ireland as well, and they have failed because instead of addressing the ambiguous space separating how they have been described—by their father, by the Ballybeg villagers, by the world—with who they are, they have tried to escape it.

It is much easier to escape geography than history. The voices of childhood are transformed to memory and memory, too, acquires a permanent voice when it is textually inscribed. For Ireland, memory's voice includes an entire language that was converted by force from daily reality into history. Gaelic today is remembered by all but spoken by few—what implications does this have for the history of pre-colonial Ireland? Culture can be recalled post-mortem, but it risks stiffening into irrelevance without a living language to express it. Language is both means and end in all political relationships, be they personal as in *Aristocrats* or national as in *Translations*, a play which takes the act of colonizing for its context and presents a more literal treatment of history as language than *Aristocrats* does. Friel explores imperialism as an illustration of the power language exerts; or how an outsider can redefine boundaries in such a way as to effectively marginalize the original insider. Ireland was anglicized brutally, but the nation's incapacity to withstand translation and its forfeiture of the power of enunciation, like modern Ballybeg Hall's refusal to exist in real time, interest the playwright more than the fact that anglicization happened. History can wreak havoc with language, through the distortion of memory or the violent uprooting of a tongue, but Friel reminds us that language is the architect of history as well.

*Translations* is based on the first topological survey of Ireland, executed in 1833 by the British army and coinciding with the establishment of the National Education System, both acts serving to legitimize British occupation of the island. The setting is a farmyard hedge school in Ballybeg (or Baile Beag, which means small town<sup>4</sup>) typical of rural education at that time, where Gaelic-speaking peasant students, ranging from semi-literate farmers to improbable classical scholars, learn mathematics, geography, Latin and Greek. The schoolmaster, Hugh, is emblematic of his nation: eloquent and unsteady on his feet, he is a reminder (or a precursor) of the drunken stage Irishman. His lame son, Manus, who substitutes when Hugh is absent or too absent-minded to teach, and Maire, Jimmy, Sarag, Bridget, and Dan Doalty comprise the school. *Translations'* plot focuses on their reaction, as individuals and citizens of an invaded country, to the British mapmakers in uniform, who are represented by Captain Lancey and Lieutenant Yolland. The soldiers are assisted in their scheme by Hugh's eldest son, Owen, the trusted bilingual native who serves them for more money than anyone in Ballybeg has ever seen, and whose name, not incidentally, they cannot pronounce.

Although the story centers on Ballybeg's forced "translation," the plot is complicated by a romance between Lieutenant Yolland and Maire. Their

poignantly comic efforts to communicate with each other—she in Gaelic, he in English, although both actors for our sake speak English—let us believe that what is essential in the human spirit is oblivious to the confines of idiom and political power. Yolland disappears before the end of the play amid suspicions that he has been “disappeared” to pay for breaking the village’s cultural rules, but Maire’s uninterrupted love for him is less pathetic than hopeful. He will not come back to her, but he has introduced her to a new world, one that demands English but also suggests opportunity unimaginable for a woman in Ballybeg. *Translations* ends with the entire region threatened with eviction over the loss of the British soldier, and with Maire beginning English lessons with Hugh. Friel’s British soldiers are simultaneously conquerors and conquered; history has conceded them victory but Ireland has, in some measure, restored their humanity. When the hedge schools and the Gaelic tongue were silenced under the National Education System, the potential for a certain way of living was lost not only for Ireland, but for the world. The consequences of the victor recognizing the reciprocity of the burden of victory may be felt in human terms, but they do not alter history.

If Ballybeg has a humanizing effect on its colonizers and its visitors (as in *Aristocrats*), it cripples or somehow incapacitates those who are born and die there. Friel’s most optimistic characters—Alice and Uncle George in *Aristocrats* and Maire in *Translations*—are the emigrants, the Irish who go away. Living in a country defined by frustrated borders, an ambiguous faith, and an imposed tongue leaves individuals empty of definition and will. Like the self-protectively eccentric family of modern Ballybeg Hall, the nineteenth century inhabitants of Baile Beag are incomplete. Jimmy is an unkempt old man reading Homer in the original and Sarah is a girl-woman who speaks in animal grunts and mimed signifiers. She learns in the first scene to say her name while Jimmy mumbles happily about Athena. By the end of the play Sarah will have lost her new-found voice as well as her name and Jimmy will plan to wed his goddess in a drunken never-never land. The events of the play, the translation of the parish accomplished by violence, robs them of their already uncertain hold on reality. Sarah reverts to the preverbal state she grew up in and Jimmy retreats to ancient Greece, both worlds more negotiable than Ballybeg.

One irony of colonization is that it initially represents a step backward. The mother country can only render her adopted offspring obedient by taking away—not denying but erasing—the history that defines them, and by institutionalizing a colonial mentality of submissive silence. A nation rechristened, as Ireland was in the early nineteenth century, may have no choice but to revert to childlike fantasy, a stubborn clinging to the stories it grew up with. Yolland wants to learn Gaelic, but Hugh warns him:

. . . 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 . . . and it can happen that a civilization can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of . . . fact.<sup>5</sup>

Fact in this case is the accelerated demise of the Gaelic language, and the need for cultural expression independent of words. Individuals can adapt to a new



tongue, but it is less certain whether a people can withstand the act of translation. Something inevitable is lost in the process; it may be a cultural nuance or it may be the culture itself.

Maire, however, resents the Irish culture that feeds romantically upon stubborn, mystic pessimism. The hedge school chatter in the first act turns, as usual, to this year's potato crop and the sweet smell of blight is reported in the fields. Maire's frustration focuses on the Irish penchant for despair—every year the potato blight and other disasters are prophesied and every year they do not occur. Maire wants to learn English instead of Latin; she wants to take part in the modern world. Even Daniel O'Connell, she says, recommends learning the new language, although whether he foresaw the disappearance of Gaelic as living communication is doubtful. All of Ireland in 1833 was forced to redefine itself in English terms—folklore has never stood up well against an army. But in the beginning of *Translations* the soldiers are less a threat than a curiosity. Yolland and his commanding officer must describe their work to the locals:

LANCEY—(He clears his throat. He speaks as if he were addressing children—a shade too loudly and enunciating excessively.) You may have seen me—working in this section—section? Working. We are here—here—in this place—you understand?—to make a map—a map and—

JIMMY—Nonne Latine loquitur?

LANCEY—(To Jimmy) I do not speak Gaelic, Sir. (30)

Lancey is made funny by the classical subversive method of speaking in code, but we know that the imperial might signalled by his uniform does not necessitate verbal communication. The playwright unmistakably puts us in the soldiers' shoes, because if the actors used the Gaelic we acknowledge the characters to be using, we would be as confused and defensive as Lancey is throughout the play. Yet because we cannot have both languages, we are also like Maire, who will learn English only at the expense of her native tongue; she will also learn that her only liberation from the national pessimism is escaping Ireland itself.

Lancey's lack of expression directly contradicts (and confronts) the loquaciousness of Hugh. Lyrically invoking the gods, heroes, and poets of the past, Hugh knowingly enshrouds himself in nostalgic blarney. He has been promised a post at the new National School. Like Maire he wants to see Ireland participate in the writing of its history. That this history must be not only translated, but from now on enacted in English is a fact that legend cannot alter. Friel allows Hugh his backward glances, and we sympathize, but we are also aware that while Hugh is mythologizing, Ireland is being dragged into the modern colonial world. Ironically, it is Yolland who complains the loudest about the consequences his surveying work will have for Ballybeg. He has constantly to be reminded, like a tourist bemoaning the television antenna sprouting from the native American's adobe house, that he is an outsider and has not looked at both sides of the exotic culture. He feels enchanted by the timelessness of County Donegal, by its beauty and refusal to submit to change.

The day I arrived in Ballybeg—no, Baile Beag—I had a curious sensation. It's difficult to describe. It was a momentary sense of discovery; no—not quite a sense of discovery, a sense of recognition, as if I had stepped. . . . (40)

But he cannot express what he has stepped into; Ireland has rendered him speechless.

Yolland wants very much to learn to speak. Like Professor Tom, he obediently performs his task of intrusion into foreign soil while vaguely realizing that in translating County Dongal's place names he is making it unrecognizable to the people who live there. Yolland is young and unschooled in the British army's imperialist etiquette. A traveller longing for acceptance by the natives, he makes heroic efforts to master their speech even while he is irreparably mastering their space. Owen, the Irishman working for the enemy (who call him Roland), is a less sympathetic character than Yolland, but he is not entirely a traitor. His task demands discarding Gaelic place names that are unpronounceable, archaic, and as he remarks, idiosyncratic to the point of referring to nothing in the real world. Thus Lis na Muc becomes Swinefort; Bun na hAbhann, Burnfoot; Druim Dubh, Dromduff; Croc na Ri, Kingshead; and Baile Beag, Ballybeg. Owen has the same ambitions for Ireland that his father has, but he is an instrument of colonial modernization while Hugh is only its observer. Both know that even a culture defined through hundreds of generations is not invincible; once lost it is subject to a precarious existence in history books and memory. As Tacitus wrote in the *Agricola*, and I translate since Latin is no longer the shared code it once was, "It is easier to stamp out learning than to recall it." (20)

The most ardent student in the play is, in fact, Yolland, bewitched as he is by everything Irish. He seduces Maire with the few Gaelic words he has learned, but their recognition of one another signals the violent incursion of wordless reality into the Ballybeg pleasance. The soldier vanishes, Manus runs off because he is also in love with Maire and knows that he cannot compete with Yolland's offer of real change, and Captain Lancey threatens to destroy the parish unless his lieutenant is found. Lancey's communication difficulties are again comic (his English version of the eviction orders has to be translated for the townspeople), but now the comedy is colored by the facts of British military impatience and the probability that Yolland will not be found alive. His romance with Maire and attempts to learn Gaelic constitute an unpardonable occupation of Ballybeg's space; in other words the lack of distinction between himself and them is worse than Lancey's bullying, and a small, organized (but unseen) faction of villagers see him as one threat they can covertly eliminate. Their overt response to Lancey's eviction orders is to steal the soldiers' horses and set fire to their tents, the smell of which causes Bridget to cry:

The sweet smell! Smell it! Jesus, it's the potato blight!

DOALTY—It's the army tents burning, Bridget.

BRIDGET—Is it? Are you sure? Is that what it is? God, I thought we were destroyed altogether. (63)

And so they are altogether destroyed. Robbed of their collective voice, their only articulate response is "dumb" violence, the pure verbs of terrorism that

may be the only statement possible for a people who have been translated into silence.

At the end of the play Owen leaves the Name Book of place name translations on the ground where it has fallen, reflecting not so much English or the act of renaming, but rather language itself. Denying the privilege of the mother tongue is possible only at the expense of denying the power of words and the defining act that words perform. *Translations* ends with a funeral for the infant whose christening Hugh attended at the beginning of the play. It lived only long enough to receive a name, an identity, a label with which to mark the parish records as proof that it existed. Ballybeg must retain its name as well; that its significance must be erased in translation is a fact of history. This play and *Aristocrats* both end inconclusively, with Ballybeg Hall about to be locked forever and Ballybeg town facing mass eviction, an event that history tells us happened again and again throughout the nineteenth century. Gaelic will join Latin and ancient Greek in the realm of languages more studied than spoken, a fact of history to come which Friel treats as an aspect not only of Irish culture and politics, but of performance as well. Ballybeg represented on stage in English may be a concession that Ireland has had to learn to make, but the playwright makes us the victims of this necessity more than its perpetrators; he finally aligns us more closely with Baile Beag than Ballybeg, even though we only understand the language of the latter. By reminding us over and over in *Translations* of our mediated access to what the Irish characters say, he makes us actors, not just spectators, in the problem faced by all bilingual artists who choose to express themselves and their past in the colonist's tongue rather than the native tongue. We are made dependent, albeit precariously, on words that we know have been translated for our benefit; thus we are privy to the violation of personal and cultural identity entailed in the activity of changing names. Friel passes his artistic problem to us, and as we begin to recognize our primary knowledge of English as a handicap rather than an endowment, we, like Friel's Ballybeg, can begin to move out of our childlike, unexamined faith in words. The act of telling the story preempts, as it should, the story itself because all colonizing stories are the same. Friel's dramas challenge us to define ourselves with the Irish and all colonized people as the victims of language instead of history; victims, however, whose loss of speech should point not toward silence, but toward action.

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## Notes

1. Seamus Heaney reviewed *Translations* at the Dublin Theatre festival in October of 1980 (the play was first performed a month earlier by Friel's Field day Company in Derry, North Ireland) for the *Times Literary Supplement* 4047 (1980): 1199.

2. Seamus Heaney, "Oysters," *Field Work*, (New York: Farrar, 1979) 11.

3. Brian Friel, *Aristocrats*, (Dublin: Gallery, 1980) 40. All subsequent references are to this edition.

4. Ronald Gene Rollins, *Divided Ireland: Bifocal Vision in Modern Irish Drama*, (Lanham, New York: UP of America, 1985) 81.

5. Brian Friel, *Translations*, (London: Faber, 1981) 42-43. All subsequent references are to this edition.