Post-Colonial Studies

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Erasure of Language and its Effects on Culture in *Translations*

"Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" says the narrator of Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" of the lost letters of the US Postal Service (Melville). A letter which has no recipient, no one to read its words, has no voice, and indeed that is a microcosm of the loss of a language; if there is no one left who can speak a language, the language dies. Such is the case of the Irish language, its position within the play "Translations", and the efforts to prevent this loss from happening.

Translations is set in 1833, at a time when the British were engaging in a large-scale survey of the country –the Ordnance Survey. The British goal was to anglicize the names of places, map the land and its people, and indeed quell the influence of the native Irish. The play sees Irish characters who are natively raised in the Irish language, but who are increasingly forced to learn some degree of English to fit in with the military forces who have set up camp nearby. In 1833 the Irish language had a strong presence across the land, despite being an English obsession for several centuries. However, following the events of the play, and the subsequent famine, the language was rapidly lost. *The Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, which published an article interested in "The Celtic Languages of the British Isles" showed that the areas in which Irish had a foothold were rapidly shrinking, as was the population that spoke it. It suggests that by 1871 the population of largely Irish-speaking land was in rapid decline, and it was projected that in many parts of the country the language would soon become

extinct (Ravenstein). By the 1926 census it would seem that only 18.3% of the total population spoke any Irish (Central Statistics Office).

Enter Brian Friel who, alongside a group of other Irish creatives, was dedicated to the revitalization of the Irish language. This may seem curious, as *Translations* is staged in English, but while the play itself has reasons for this, and it makes it immediately available to wider audience, there is a particular audience which is likely behind the reasoning: had the play been staged in Irish, even its native audience would not have necessarily been able to understand it. It is a strong statement against the impending extinction of the language, and a swift call to words, for people to begin relearning, and thus revitalizing, the tongue.

This imbalance of English and Irish –as well as Latin and Greek– serve as an effective device within the play too, not just in the world of reality. Many of the characters are, in the context of the play's world, speaking in Irish, either by choice to rebel against the British standardization, or because it is their primary language. The reality –or the unreality, as is perhaps more accurate– of the audience receiving the play in English is given light in brief ironic lines the likes of Maire's "fit me better if I had even that much English" (Friel, 8). She is regretfully noting her lack of English to the schoolteacher Jimmy, while using her limited Latin, whilst speaking in Irish, and altogether being heard in the very language she wants to learn. It is indeed a very meta approach to dramatic irony. It is also a chief example of the tragedy at hand. Maire sees a future in which a solid grasp of English is a vital component of life; even in her own country she knows that many jobs, such as the hedge school she stands in, will be replaced by English-speaking positions. To survive in her own land, she needs to learn the language, and in doing so see her own slip –however slowly– through her fingers, and the world.

English is a force of erasure in the play, taking away culture, and even identity. The Ordnance survey itself is, in large part, a nationwide colonial effort by the British military to anglicize Irish language. As the stage directions at the head of Act 2, Scene 1 highlight, through the survey's renaming, "a Gaelic name like Cnoc Ban would become Knockban or —directly translated— Fair Hill" (Friel, 38). While Owen notes that the stories behind many of the names are falling out of memory, the name itself is a marker of this past time, of the history of the land and its people; of culture. The names, even without their story remembered, indicate that there *is* a story to be told, people who lived in that space, inhabited it, made it their own. To eliminate the name takes legitimacy away from the place, an agency from the people, rebranding it with all the impersonal zeal of the colonial machine.

However, in this pursuit of erasure, the British officers required the aide of locals who knew the language and place-names. It, along with the increasing rush towards English language adoption, is a form of mimicry thrust upon the people, a compulsory sense that to succeed is to be English, to speak English. The primary setting of the play is that of a hedge school, a rural place of learning with "a more extensive and liberal than the utilitarian curriculum which was available to the poor in England or indeed in the rival educational institutions in Ireland" ("Antonia McManus"). They emerged as a form of educational resistance to the strict British law surrounding schooling of Catholics —whom they discriminated against— and the poor. The schools that were legally available were the realm of those citizens whom the British deemed good and English, and were increasingly taught in English. Bridget, a friend of Manus and the other hedge-school teachers and students, heard of a new national school being installed nearby in which: "from the very first day you go, you'll not hear one word of Irish spoken. You'll be taught to speak English and every subject will be taught through English" (Friel, 19). Marie, who

sees the already illegal position Manus' school is in growing even less stable, warns him that "when it opens, this is finished: nobody's going to pay to go to a hedge-school" (Friel, 16). The hedge-school "system", as it were, was founded to give those who were unable to attend the existing schools a way to learn a variety of things —languages, especially Latin and Greek, and classic literature— which they would otherwise be denied. The elimination of these local schools further reduces not only the Irish agency, but also limits their engagement with anything not taught within the English curriculum, chiefly their own heritage and language. Hedge-school teachers, such as Manus' father Hugh, also attempted to flee into the national school system to make the most of their knowledge and skills in the shifting landscape, but to varying degrees of success. Hugh, whether for his drinking or other factors, does not secure the position of headmaster at the new school.

The mimicry of the situation is most evident, however, in Hugh's other son, Owen. Owen, having left the countryside for a time to explore city living, returns as the official translator of Yolland and the Ordnance Survey. His job is to translate the names of places that they come across, and assist Yolland in anglicizing them for the "Name-book", and the maps that will follow. It is only natural, then, that Owen himself suffers, for most of the play, this very same fate. Yolland, and the rest of the English forces, call him Roland. While he is displeased by this, and his family disconcerted, it takes the aftermath of a great debate for him to finally reclaim his identity:

> Owen (softly): My name is Owen
>
> *Pause*
>
> Yolland: Not Roland?
>
> Owen: Owen

…

Yolland: Where did Roland come from?

Owen: I don't know.

(Friel, 54)

While it is played off by the two men for laughs, it is not itself a laughing matter. While Owen has a voice for himself, and ultimately asserts it, he is the only voice that Ireland has in Yolland's ear, and it is a voice that he does not assert. He wishes to make a place for himself in this new regime of anglicization, to secure a future. He, and Maire, feel that the only way to have a hope of being able to lead a successful life is to mimic the British —they know they won't be British, and may lose some of their Irish roots, but they will have a place, a job, and further prospects. Their efforts, intentionally or not, begin to migrate them into the "middle-man" position of the empire.

Ultimately, *Translations* depicts the power that a language has to contain and disseminate culture, and the efforts of colonialism to erase that power. Changing names —of places and people— to be more British, and in the process destroying the history and memory of the land and its inhabitants.

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