

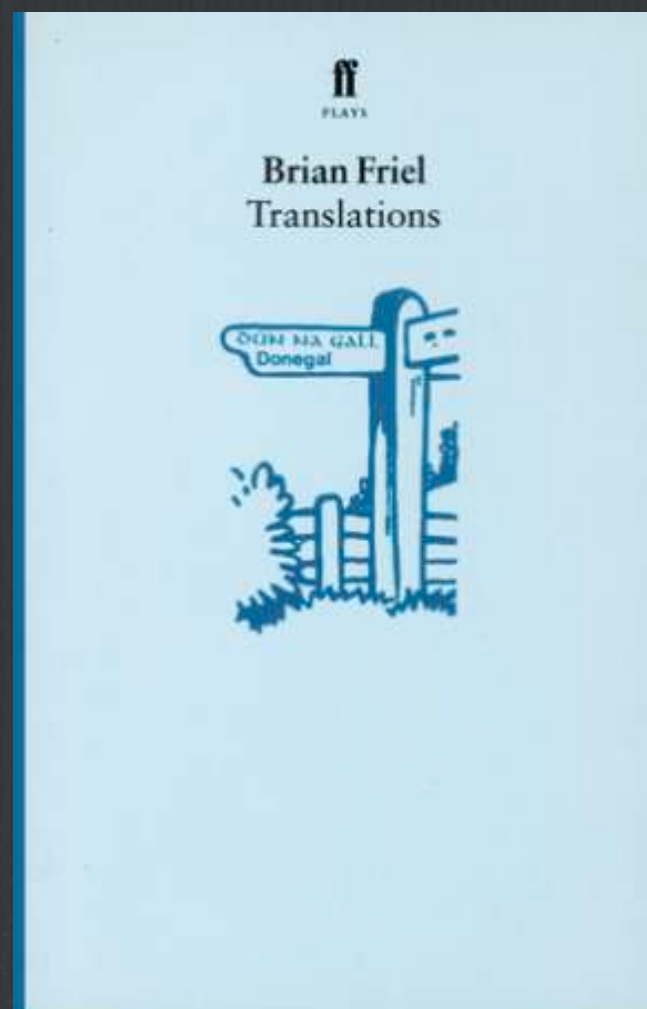
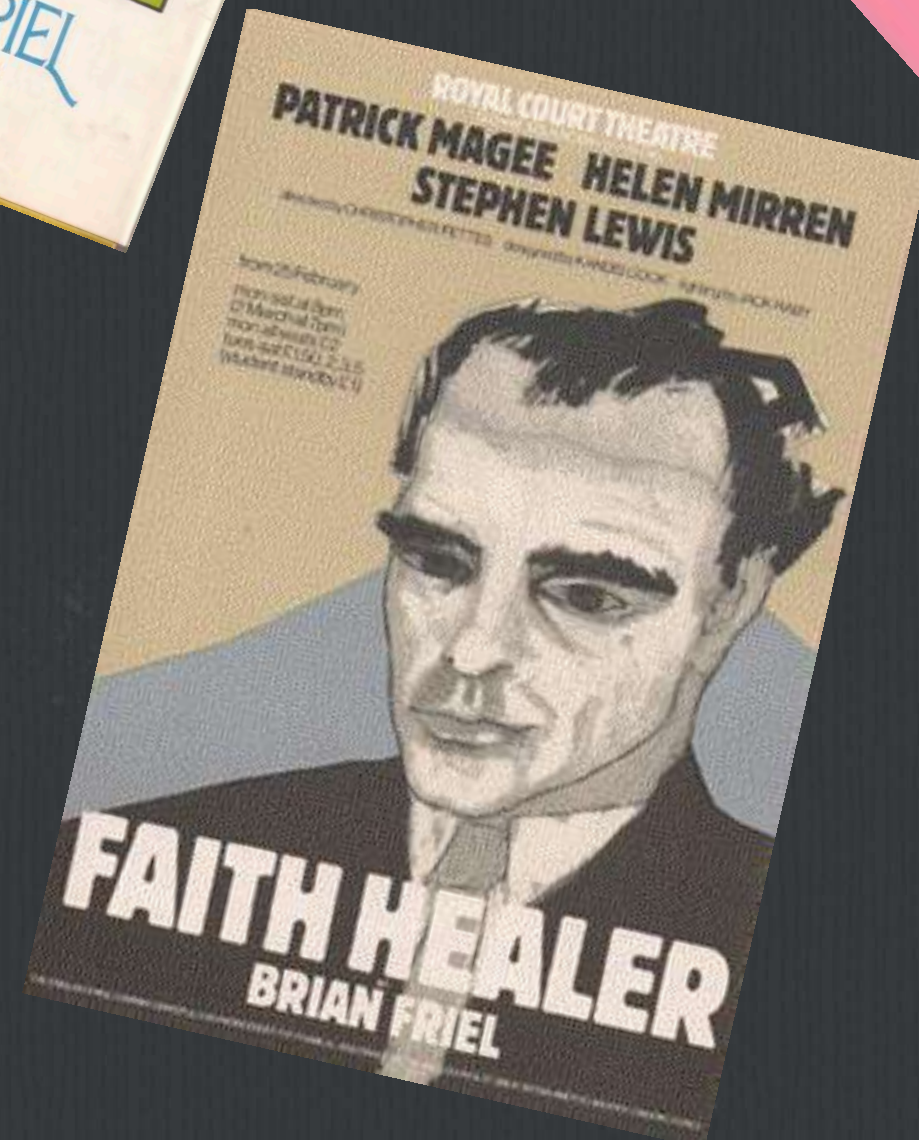
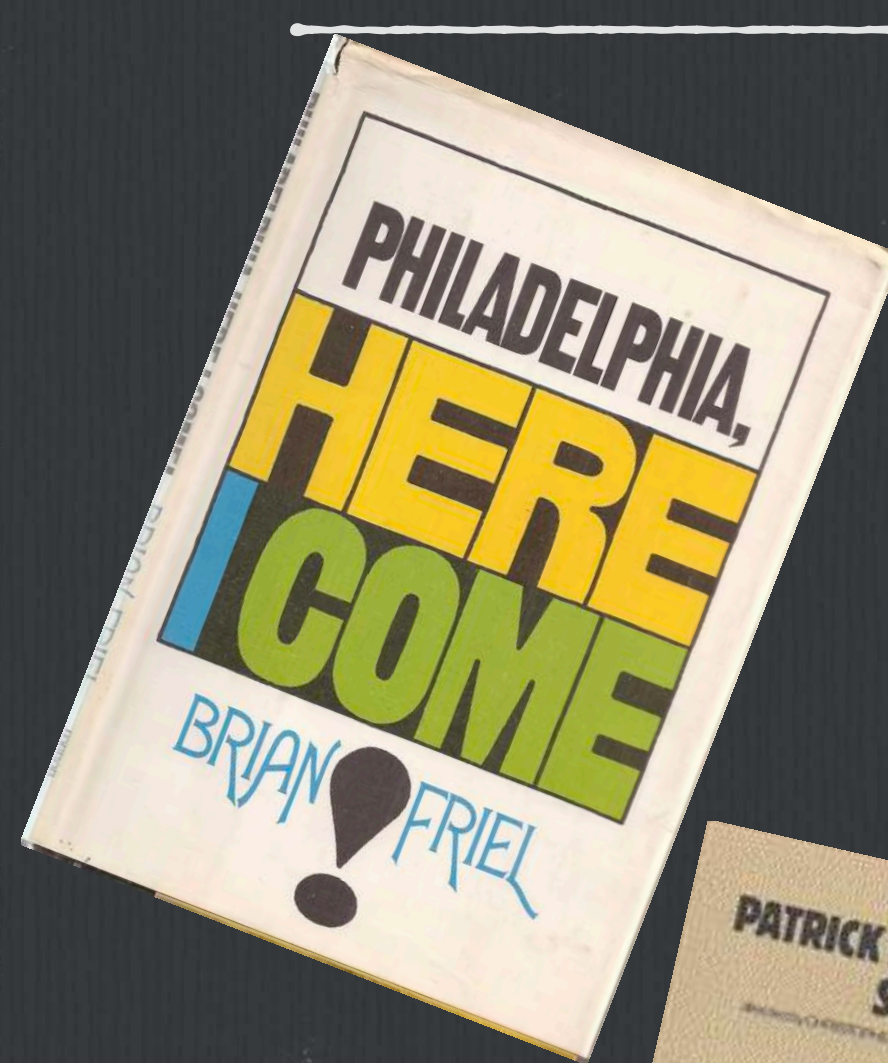
Reading Brian Friel (1929-2015) and Translations (1980)

- The post-1950s disruptive scenario in British and Irish theatre had to witness and record an angst - not only that of the post-imperial shrinking of an erstwhile empire into an island off the west coast of Europe, but also of unemployment, mass labour migration from the erstwhile colonies, loss of geo-political clout as evident in the Suez crisis of 1956, and shifts in gender role and gendered economic participation.
- If John Osborne's Look Back in Anger (picture on the top from first production at the Royal Court in London in 1956) highlights the ornamental fury of the Anglo-Saxon (white) angry young man post-empire who wants to refuse a reality adrift from his inherited illusions of gender and race hierarchies, Harold Pinter's Birthday Party (1958) revisits the crumbling resistance of the individual when his life gets cancelled by a tsunami of alternative 'facts' and alleged redemptions inflicted by the invasive Goldbergs and the McCanns, and Peter Shaffer creates a book of mirrors for his times by recasting Mozart's life on the eve of the French Revolution as a fable framed by the bureaucratic passion for malice as imaged in the famed and charitable, bureaucrat court-musician Salieri in the 1979 play Amadeus, how could we begin to engage with Irish dramatist Brian Friel's creative contribution in terms of his huge, complex corpus? (A scene of the imperial process of re-mapping and re-naming the geography from his play Translations directed by Ian Rickson is featured on the bottom right)
- Perhaps a two-pronged theory for exploring Friel's corpus could be useful, that he digs into the identification markers of the Irish, "a maimed people" in his own words (RTE documentary, 2000) who have lost their language in the British militarist cartographic-orthographic projects that erased the Irish place names, histories and stories through the first half of the nineteenth century, and quests for the peculiar role and function of art as an alphabet of alternatives in a broken society
- A native of Londonderry in Northern Ireland, a part of the United Kingdom where he belonged to the minority Catholic community, Friel migrated to neighbouring County Donegal in the Irish Republic, the county of Donegal with its haunting lonely beauty being the natural hinterlands of Derry, yet politically separated. Seamus Heaney, his poet-collaborator and friend, evoked the summer visits to his home in Muff in the county as a guilt act, almost, of being in the old dream Ireland, an elsewhere displaced.
- In 1980, Friel along with actor Stephen Rea founded the touring Irish theatre company Field Day, which became a cultural group embracing three poets, Seamus Heaney, Tom Paulin, and Seamus Deane, along with a set of Friel's friends, peers and artists. "It was founded to put on plays outside the confines of the established theatre and, through that, to begin to effect a change in the apathetic atmosphere of the North [of Ireland]", observes Seamus Deane. Translations was the debut play staged by the Field Day Theatre Company in the Guildhall, Derry, on 23rd September, 1980. It seeded beginnings of a kind of cultural invasion of northern Ireland envisioned through the founding of the company, which had sometimg "slightly underground" and "something grapevinish" about it (Steven Ray, RTE documentary). It sought to cross borders, including those between the British and Irish theatres.

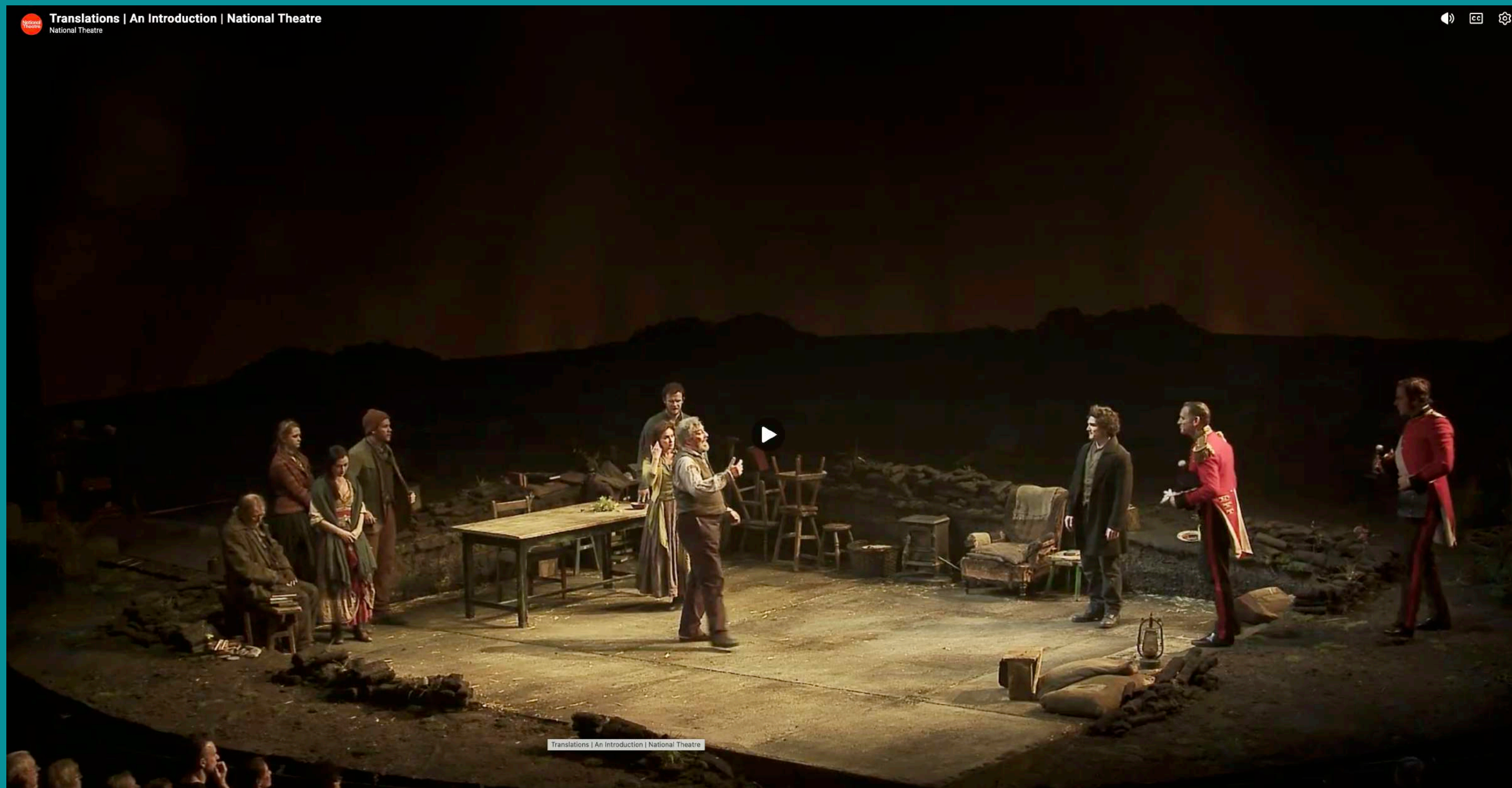


Translations, 2019, director Ian Rickson

A few recurrent tropes in Brian Friel



- The contrast between the fast-talking, utterly sceptical outsider or in-between, perhaps intimate outcast gifted with eloquence (Eamon in *Aristocrats* (1979), Owen in *Translations* (1980)) who has often chosen to leave, and the silent, almost aphasic insider (Casimir in *Aristocrats*, Manus in *Translations*)
- The role of art as a human quest for alternatives in a partitioned place and society - a crucible of disappointment and unyielding pressure - where alternative political imaginings have so often failed, and the aligned solitariness of the elusive aristocrat, the word evoked in the etymological sense of a being who embodies the presence/power of excellence, who is often projected as disabled-dispossessed in the context, though capable of the private power of complete mastery on occasion (the faith-healer in Friel's eponymous play, the inhabitants who haunt Ballybeg Hall in *Aristocrats* though the title is also mockingly ironic, or Hugh, Jimmy and Manus in *Translations*)
- Failure as a condition of vivid waiting, almost a creative condition and inheritance of human existence, and the frame of Irish desolation, such as the failure of love and alternative political imaginary in *Aristocrats* ("Love is possible only in certain contexts", rues Alice in the play), of communication and the resistance to British military ravishing of the townland of Baile Beag in *Translations*, and the failure of the faith healer to know and possess his power to heal in *Faith Healer*
- Conflict between emotional loyalties to the backward and provincial area, and obligation to the sense of self which seeks freedom, and is hence compelled to betray the native place by leaving for a more metropolitan, if shallower world, famously projected in the dialogue between the two selves of Gar O' Donnell (the public and the private) in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* (1964)
- The focus on what Michael Billington (*Guardian*) calls the "naked magnificence of the word" which often supplants action, stage business and scenery in Friel, aligned to the linguistic brilliance of much of 20th century Irish theatre. Also a parallel focus on the pagan elements of Celtic culture through elements of music and dance, folkloric or nostalgic, in plays like *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Translations*. As the hedge school master Hugh observes to the Romantic Yolland, a reluctant imperialist, in *Translations*, "You'll find, sir, that certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives." (42)
- Exile, and hauntings - of displaced voices, such as a sister long lost to missionary work in Africa in *Aristocrats*, or of a zone of official discourse with its obtuse jargon of inauthenticity and the promise of violence, as in the case of British commanding officer Captain Lancey in *Translations*, or Chicago-based academic Tom Hoffnung who has come to chronicle the culture and economics of an old Irish Catholic aristocrat family in Ballybeg. The protagonists who have chosen to leave or have come back for the moment are in exile, displaced from ease, as are the Irish people displaced from their language in Friel's plays. The trope of exile resonates with much of twentieth century Irish theatre.



Of Failure and/as Fiction in Friel

A. “Failure” is a non-formulaic word, a word that could shape-shift and haunt with what if questions. In positing “failure” as a nomad refrain across Friel’s corpus, I evoke the non-formulaic of fumble, failure, disruption and absence as doors to entering some of the possibilities conjured with infinite compassion for an exhausted people, the Irish, who could these days be easily imagined as objective correlative for someplace else.

B. The questers for excellence, whether the exuberant arriviste or the silent residual insider in Ballybeg (Baile Beag in Gaelic), the Irish topos in which Friel homes his characters, are invariably defeated, whether it be Manus the lame scholar who cares for his father Hugh and teaches on his behalf without pay at the hedge-school, or his younger brother Owen. Owen had left and is currently “a part-time, underpaid, civilian interpreter” (29) who gets instrumentalised in the colonisers’ cartographic-militarist project of annexation and cannot help betraying his ancestral and anachronistic community unto the modern Anglicised world, though left finally powerless either to rescue his people from having their livestock and homestead ravished or refuse his position as colluders of the ruthless British.

C. Translations hosts multiple failures: “The failure of language to accommodate experience, the failure of a name to fully indicate a place, the failure of lovers [Maire and Yolland] to find the opportunity to express their feeling whether in words or deed”(Seamus Deane 22). As does Aristocrats, in which the children of erstwhile aristocrats fail to cope with Ballybeg Hall as their image of home, a sprawl of a ruined inheritance that they cannot now afford to maintain and inhabit. Casimir, the male heir and protagonist in the play, has to invent the fiction of a family of wife and young children in Germany to escape his failure, and Alice and Eamon, who have left the Hall with the baggage of a cross-class marriage between an aristocrat and a plebeian, find themselves imprisoned in a lonely, empty relation that has to now tether itself to the fiction of love. The deep-rooted sense of an inescapable failure haunts the travelling faith-healer Frank Hardy too in Friel’s play, and he finds liberation from the maddening, tormenting questions around becoming a husk, only once he prepares to surrender to the violent, inevitable fate of death in the hands of a carousing set of angry young groomsman, on homecoming to Ireland.

D. The inherited histories of failure in Friel - of political alternatives, content, passion, revelation or love in life, even the banal security of material certainties - infuse the alleged metric-taxonomic grids inflicted on the inconsolable existence of the Irish trapped by their shabby, bleak, derelict lives, with the salve of the fictive-oneiric. Failure erupts into a route to becoming through consoling fiction as each character also spins illusions, the aspiration for dignity among humans abjected and anguished having consistently fascinated Friel. Storytelling as a persistent self-reflexive act by characters within Friel’s corpus, erupts into a susurrus of alternatives and defiance, even if it be a flight as audaciously fantastic as Jimmy Jack Cassie’s who has imagined for decades a trans-dimensional love affair with Athena, the flashing-eyed Hellenic goddess of wisdom and war. Storytelling, especially by those anonymised and sidelined in mainstream history, such as the poor Irish Catholics represented in Friel’s plays, then emerges as metaphor of the phoenix role of the creative act, in creating a polis, a universe filled with fictive extensions of the self, in exile. In Making History (1988), Archbishop Lombard transcreates failed anti-colonial Irish uprisings into a glorious myth, and the wretched exile Hugh O’Neill into a national Irish hero of the Elizabethan times. Indeed, the play Translations, in recording the loss of a language and hope, ironically and triumphantly, in the language of the imperial translators, seems to vindicate the power of imagination to survive, to yet tell stories, and refuse the singulars foisted by the tasters of triumph. Failure metamorphosed into fiction, even the fiction of “always”, that precarious fairy-tale tense the border-crossing lovers Maire and Yolland choose to believe in, is thus evoked as a haunted site of possibility of miracle and utopia, and radical unfinishedness across Friel’s works.

Of Language, Polyglossia, Place and Presence

- ♦ Language, in its sonic and semantic potency, as also in the weight of silence or “things unspoken” (*Aristocrats* 279), defines a core value in Friel. His corpus torques on the tension between eloquence and silence of the central cast of defeated characters, whether they be Owen and Manus, Eamon and Casimir, or the two selves, public and private, of Gar O’Donnell. He already writes in translation, in between languages, in an English that heaves with cadences of the lost Irish. Plays like *Translations* feature multiple languages, including Greek and Latin which pepper the dialogue of most of the characters, and not only the scholars Hugh, Jimmy and Manus. The English in his plays speaks with a forked tongue, remembering registers in exile, and crafted in magical betrayal of the linguistic promise of the single and the pure. It inhabits the ethic of polyglossia.
- ♦ The forgotten Gaelic place-names often conjured in plays like *Faith Healer* or *Translations* invoke the politics of presence of the sacred sublime in the local, ordinary and proximate scapes (Bill Ashcroft “The Sacred in Australian Culture” 22) through the mesmerism, sedation and incantatory rhythm of barely remembered words that recreate a textual spatiality connected to the palimpsest of memories and stories associated with place-names that have been driven underground:

Frank Hardy: Aberarder, Aberayron,

Llangranog, Llangurig,

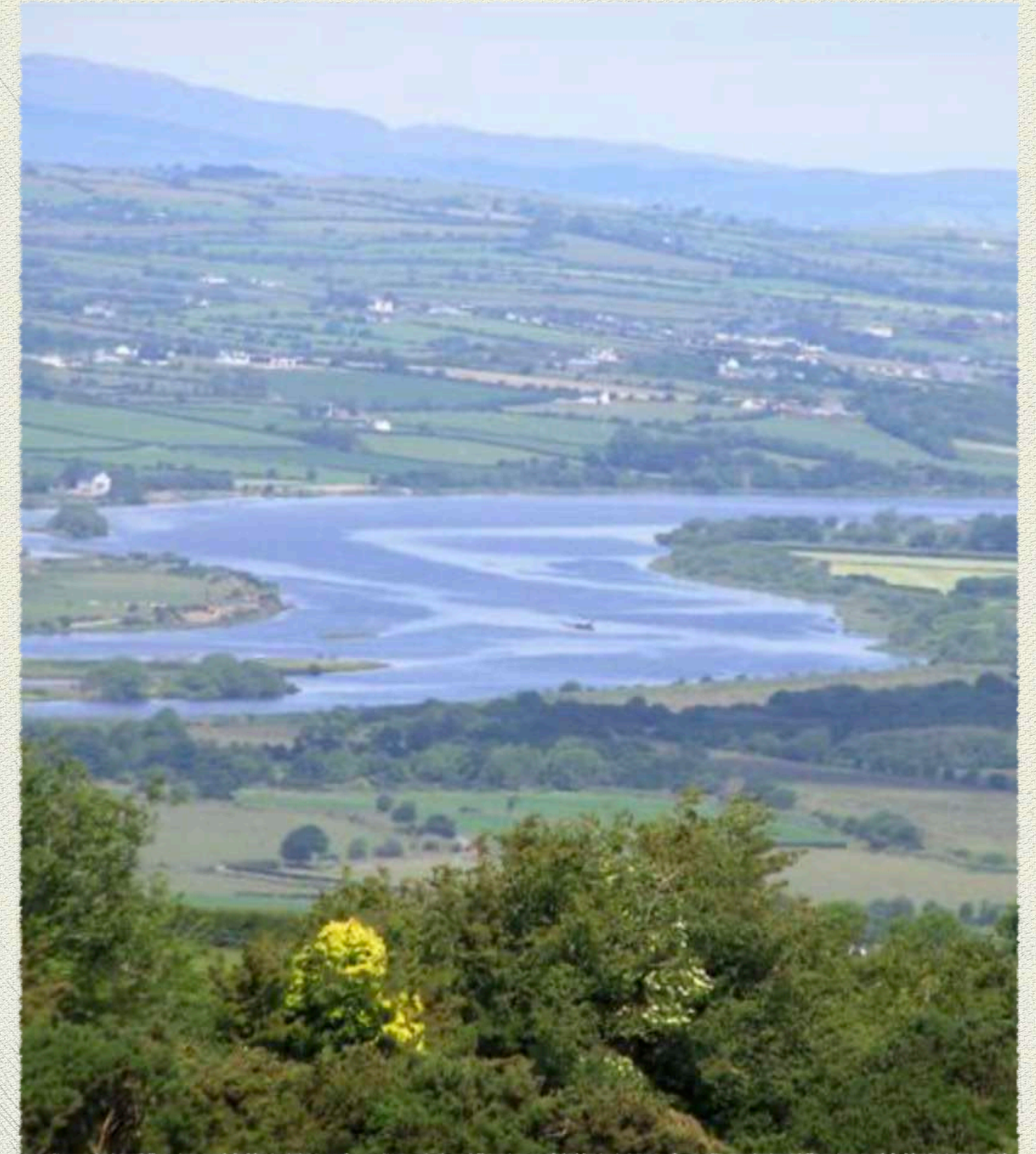
Abergorlech, Abergynolwyn,

Llandefeilog, Llanerchymedd,

Aberhosan, Aberporth...

All those dying Welsh villages. (Eyes open.) (*Faith Healer* 332)

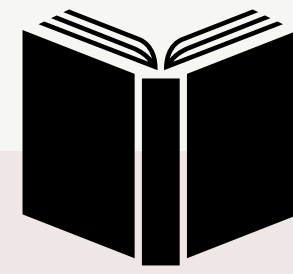
- Orthographer and accidental imperialist Yolland in *Translations* similarly chants Celtic place-names which were being replaced en masse by the approximate English sound or by translation into English words, ironically under his supervision. He realises this involves “an eviction of sorts” (43), nonetheless chants the place-names “softly, almost privately, very tentatively” as signals to his Irish beloved Maire with whom language has become the barrier; they cannot understand each other. He recites the place names Bun na Abhann, Druim Dubh, Lis Mail, Lis na nGradh, Carriage na Ri, Loch na nEan, Mullach, Tor, as gestures of a gift to his beloved, as it were, of place-names and histories he has had to obliterate, and the magic works: “They begin moving - almost imperceptibly - towards one another.” (51) (The picture on the right features the river Foyle near which Friel lived, in County Donegal.)
- ♦ And yet, though Yolland is an emissary of project translation in the Ordnance survey conducted by the British in Ireland through the 1830s, his words of love for Maire remain an incommunicable. What then happens to the telos of translations in the eponymous play, and its apparently triumphalist fate ordained by Captain Lancy?



The imperial traffic of translation in *Translations*



- Brian Friel refers to translation as "a play about the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English and the profound effects that that change-over would have on a people". ("Making a Reply to the Criticisms of *Translations* by J. H. Andrews" 116), made from his interest in the ordnance survey of Ireland as ordained by the colonisers, and particularly the orthographical pursuits and torments of translators in enaming-recreating the country of Ireland through the first half of the nineteenth century, in order to accord with its 1800 integration into the United Kingdom.
- The word "translation" etymologically means "carrying across", "across" presupposes "boundaries". This is quite in keeping with translation as a dominant metaphor of and instrument for colonisation. Translation according to George Steiner, involves "penetration" of the source text, a sexual image loaded with the coloniser's ambition to invade and husband virgin lands, or invent a terra nullius with "a thousand baptisms" of place-names (*Translations* 45) obliterating the earlier set. The territory, as well as culture, economics, polity and politics of the colony became vulnerable to violation in the name of translation, their texts could be tamed, places renamed, histories erased, and then some items selectively curated with extensive anthropological footnotes through translation. Indeed, project imperialism aspired to re-make colonies as copies or "translations" of Europe which posed to be the great uncontaminated Original (Bassnett and Trivedi 4), and dedicated servant of the empire Captain Lancey in Friel's play is unable to perceive Ireland as anything else but a colony. Translation and violence became mirror-images of each other in an age of aggressive and constantly proliferating boundaries, as is evident when the cartographic project turns into a military eviction of the peasants at Captain Lancey's command. Translation here is weaponised by the colonialists to decode the 'colony', and reduce the scape into the relative stasis of a two-dimensional map accessible through Anglicised names. The linguistic-cartographic project is paralleled by Lancey's scorched earth policy that levels Baile Beag, and the new national school system that would shortly replace the local hedge schools catering to Catholics with a uniform curriculum, compulsory attendance and not one word of Irish spoken, the medium of instruction being exclusively English (22), in effect rendering T. B. Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Education for raising uniform babus and bureaucrats loyal to the British imperial project.
- The hedge-schools set up for the instruction of the Irish Catholic majority across Ireland, served as an alternative model of knowledge production, dissemination and translation. Its curricula were diverse and designed to suit the academic level and aspiration of the individual student. In *Translations* for instance, Maire learns to read maps, Bridget practices writing, Doalty tries to remember his arithmetic tables, and Sarah is personally mentored to enunciate clearly and overcome her stammer, while Jimmy Jack who joins as an ageing pupil rehearses the Greek and Latin classics with Hugh the hedge school master.
- In *Translations*, Friel begins with digging into the colonial-cartographic project of the obsession with mapping and renaming the entire country as someplace else, as a method of possession. As drunk hedgeschool master Hugh astutely concludes on looking at the Name-Book, "We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home." (66). Owen his younger son, the insider-outsider with a travelling bag, is the facilitator of this project of occupation and pre-empt the postcolonial iconic figure of the unmoored migrant writer-translator. And yet towards the end, translator Owen, so long complicit with Lancey's mission, translated back the Anglicised names into his native language. In excess of the dictates of empire, translation as an epistemological-literary and ethical category, shape-shifts into possibilities of subversion, irreducible plurals and the post-colonial pigmentation of cross-fertilisation in Brian Friel's *Translations*, the category refuses the colonial call of a one-way traffic.



On the plural non-colonial possibilities of translation in Brian Friel, with special reference to *Translations*



- The prefix “trans-” has another etymological meaning besides “across”, it is “beyond”. If “translation” may also be interpreted as “carrying beyond”, the rush to raze and erase cultures, languages, memories and histories melts into shadowlines and cross-fertilisation, rather than encroachment-invasion, and emerges as the fresh poetics of post-colonial translation. Translation is re-invented as a radically polyvalent, liminal term in *Translations*, the ineluctable category when living uncontaminated by alternatives does not remain an option. The play turns out to be quite a parable for our neo-colonial times, when translation could include not only writing back, but also writing autonomously, in a register seeking alterities.
- When Lancey’s command seems to erase, yet again, all potential of linguistic/ecological alterity in Ireland, the term “translation” itself is transported from a merely military imperialistic category that wants to map and charter, to a pluripotent signal of counters. Jimmy Jack and Hugh recite Homer in Greek and render it in their native tongue fluidly, conversationally, at home in both languages, turning on its head the terror of translation imposed by the empire. Most students at the hedge-school are conversant in Latin and Greek, besides Irish. The hedge school master considers English a tongue particularly suited “for the purposes of commerce” and cultivates innocence of literature in that language: “I went on to propose that our own culture and the classical tongues made a happier conjugation... English, I suggested, couldn’t really express us” (25). Odysseus in his exhaustion of homecoming and frequency of access to Athena is their relatable hero, rather than the contemporary British Romantic icon Wordsworth.
- The text of *Translations*, though dealing with the crisis of colonisation, is post-colonial in its self-reflexivity. It features translation and intertextuality as a rite of writing, drawing unabashedly from Homer, Virgil, George Steiner. And finally, the text in itself is translational, the lost language of Irish having been rendered in English throughout. Interestingly, the play unfolds in a non-English speaking world, a world that can today be revisited only in English, so absolute had been the violent triumph of the imperial translation project. Yet English had morphed too into an intimate domestic linguistic furniture for the Irish, such that the playwright seeks to perform the trauma of his colonial disinheritance in its post-colonial healing space. The failed dream of translation in the border-crossing tragic affair of Army Engineer Yolland and Maire, who find themselves barricaded in their respective language, has been achieved in the act of writing the text itself.
- In *Faith Healer*, too, Friel invents “translation” as currency of creation, in the sense of “saying after” or “anuvad”, the proximate Sanskrit term for “translation”, rather than “carrying across”. The old Irish legend of Deirdre is trans-created to suit the contemporary context. The “original” theme of a well-brought up girl, destined for a noble calling in the north of Ireland, then eloping to Scotland with an attractive but feckless man Naoise to the dismay of her father, is reworked by Friel from Naoise’s perspective. Translation emerges as his time-machine to revisit other times and images and stories from thence, as also the technology for border-crossing - to contest mainstream imperial Anglophone history, resist erasure, recover the forgotten pre-colonial possible pasts of Ireland and edge into what we cannot know, need not know, should not know and indeed, need to forget.

