CLASSICAL LANGUAGES AND CULTURAL MEMORY IN BRIAN FRIEL'S *TRANSLATIONS*

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the ways in which classical languages occupy the liminal space between Irish and English in Brian Friel's play *Translations*, first performed in 1980. Set in a hedge-school of County Donegal, Ireland, in 1833, almost thirty years after the Acts of Union, *Translations* is a play about language. Latin and Greek are spoken fluently by both the pupils and the hedge-schoolmaster, in a multilingual environment which however excludes the knowledge of English. This is spoken by the British soldiers who are surveying the region, getting hold of the foreign landscape by renaming Gaelic toponyms into English. Classical languages, as 'dead' languages, might prefigure the fate of Irish itself, whose cultural power is increasingly fading in the face of the growing political influence of Britain. Yet, at a closer reading, the community's attachment to the classics might be conceived as a most effective tool of anti-colonial resistance, as soon as the memory of the past embedded in language is 'translated' into an effective model for understanding and living the present.

1. INTRODUCTION

The very possibility of a real dialogue between the classical and the modern world has been an enduring, central question of literary critics, who repeatedly attempted to assess the extent of the mutual dependence and interpenetration of classicality and modernity. In the essay *On Not Knowing Greek*, with her usual smart jocosity Virginia Woolf argues that:

> it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition. (Woolf 1984 [1925]: 23)

This fundamental break in continuity between classical and modern culture, which Woolf both ironically and regretfully refers to, does not seem to matter at all in *Translations* (1980), landmark three-act play by Irish dramatist Brian Friel[1]. Set in the late summer of 1833, *Translations* stages the disruptive consequences of a cultural encounter. In the imaginary small town of Baile Beag, County Donegal, Ireland, a group of English-speaking British soldiers conducting the Ordnance Survey of the land is welcomed by the Irish-speaking locals, members of a rural hedge-school[2], with mixed

[1] The play first opened on 23 September 1980 in Derry, Northern Ireland, presented by the Field Day Theatre Company, founded by Friel and Stephen Rea, one of the most accomplished Irish actors of his generation. Class of 1929, Brian Friel was born in Omagh, Northern Ireland. Ten years later, his family, of Catholic upbringing, moved to Derry (Londonderry for the unionists), where Friel spent his youth and formative years, eventually becoming a school teacher, as his father had been. He first gained popularity as a playwright in 1964, with the highly acclaimed *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* Other landmark plays by Brian Friel are *Aristocrats* (1979), *The Communication Cord* (1982) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990). As it is the case for *Translations*, many of his plays are set in Baile Beag, fictitious rural town in County Donegal, Friel's mother's home place. For a thorough introduction to his life and work see Anthony Roche (2006).

[2] Cf. OED, *hedge-school*: «A school held by a hedge-side or in the open air, as was once common in Ireland; hence, a poor, mean, low-class school.» For a thorough and classic account, see Patrick John Dowling (1935). This source was consulted by Friel while writing the script together with a list of other readings, as he annotates in his diary (Friel 1999: 74). In the same entry, he makes the following interesting remark: «For some reason the material resists the intense and necessary fusion of its disparate parts into a whole, and the intense and necessary mental heat that accomplishes that. One aspect that keeps eluding me:

feelings, ranging from plain enthusiasm to downright scepticism. There is no *lingua franca* between the two groups and the basic conditions of communication are provided by two liminal figures, the hedge-schoolmaster Hugh and his younger son Owen, the only two characters fluent in both Irish and English. Owen, who does no longer live in Baile Beag but works for the British sappers, becomes the official interpreter of the two communities.

From the very first scene, the Irish-speaking characters are engaged in multilingual conversations, constantly mixing their native language with chunks of Latin and Greek: this is arguably the most remarkable feature of the play. Irish, Greek and Latin are used not only to comment on the passages of classical texts discussed in the hedge-school in which the play is set, but also to small-talk with one another[3]. The most learned pupil, Jimmy Jack, «is fluent in Latin and Greek but is in no way pedantic – to him it is perfectly normal to speak these tongues», as the long stage description to Act One informs the reader[4]. For Jimmy, «the world of the gods and the ancient myths is as real and as immediate as everyday life in the townland of Baile Beag» (*Trans* I 11). The living presence of the classical languages in this waning, rural Gaelic world, threatened by the ever-increasing cultural power of Britain, is arguably one of the most striking features of *Translations*, which by Friel's own admission (1999: 75) «has to do

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the wholeness, the integrity, of that Gaelic past. Maybe because I don't believe in it.» As Lorna Hardwick (2009: 185) points out with regard to *Translations*, «the conjunction of the Irish language, Classics, and Irish politics and identity associated with the hedge schools seems to have become a matter of history as well as cultural myth.»

[3] The significance of the two classical languages in Friel's play has been first explored by Brian Arkins (1991). For a more general, rich account on the relationship between Irish and classical culture, see W.B. Stanford (1976). So extensive is the use of classical languages in the play that the first edition of *Translations* (1981) offers an English translation of all the occurrences in the useful appendix «Greek and Latin Used in the Text».

[4] Brian Friel (1981: I 11). For ease of access, all further in-text references will be indicated in parentheses with the abbreviation *Trans*.

with language and only language.» Most important, the English spoken on stage stands for two languages: the English of the colonisers and the Irish of the hedge-school community. As Pelletier (2006: 68) suggests, «the very fact that English on stage represents two separate languages – the Irish we are asked to imagine and the English which is now the 'natural vehicle' for a play on an Irish stage – is immensely ironic and hugely significant.» The aim of this essay is to investigate how Latin and Greek 'mediate' the relationship between the two main languages of Ireland by looking closely at the function that the classics perform in the play, especially in relation with issues of cultural memory and cultural 'encounters'.

2. LANGUAGE AS A PLACE OF MEMORY

In Act One, during a lesson in which the students are intent in conjugating Latin verbs, Maire, a young, independent girl who wishes to leave her country to find fortune in America, interrupts the hedge-schoolmaster Hugh to criticise the latter's exclusive penchant for the languages of Greece and Rome, to the detriment of English: «We should all be learning to speak English. That's what my mother says. That's what I say. That's what Dan O'Connell said last month in Ennis. He said the sooner we all learn to speak English the better» (*Trans.* I 25). Hugh is indeed fond of the classics and sees with a suspicious eye the Royal Engineers of the British Army who are involved in the Ordnance Survey in the area, renaming the Irish toponyms with English equivalents, either translating them or adapting them to the English spelling. Hugh is especially appalled by their ignorant monolingualism: «I encountered Captain Lancey of the Royal Engineers [...]. He then explained that he does not speak Irish. Latin? I asked. None. Greek? Not a syllable. He speaks – on his own admission – only English; and to his credit he seemed suitably verecund» (*Trans.* I 24-25). When Hugh, superiorly feigning ignorance, prompts Maire to precise who is the «Dan O'Connell» she

is referring to, the girl's reply is firm and resolute: «I'm talking about the Liberator, Master, as you well know. And what he said was this: 'The old language is a barrier to modern progress.' He said that last month. And he's right. I don't want Greek. I don't want Latin. I want English» (*Trans.* I 25).

The radical opposition that separates Hugh's and Maire's opinions on which languages are to be preferred cannot pass unobserved: the two of them are the representatives of two different, very distant generations of a country rapidly undergoing a dramatic political, social, and cultural change. Aleida Assmann, in her influential *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011: 41), has emphasised the importance of the strong connection existing between language and awareness of historical change, further suggesting that «While texts written in the dead language of Latin could keep their historical forms intact, those written in the so-called vulgar languages revealed no such stability». Assmann's remark is valuable for shedding light on the meaning that can be attached to the use of Latin and Greek in the play. In a way, they provide the speaker with a sense of security and unchangeability, since they have as their main referent a world which is crystallised in its eternal completeness and beauty, *for ever warm and still to be enjoy'd*[5], no longer subject to temporal change. In this respect, the very status of classical languages might, so to say, foreshadow the destiny of the Irish language as Pelletier (2006: 68) puts forward: «Irish loses the ability to describe what is, and becomes, like Latin and Greek, a language that is only capable of saying what used to be.» From this perspective, the significance of the two classical languages would arguably lie in their being 'dead', hence serving as a term of comparison for the impending doom of Irish itself[6]. This is seemingly also Hugh's point of view, who thus describes his mother tongue to Lieutenant Yolland, English-speaking

[5] Sixth line of the third stanza of *Ode on a Grecian Urn* by John Keats.

[6] Similarly Richard Kearney (1988: 134): «It is of course significant that the classical tongues cultivated by the master represent *past* civilizations, now dead and gone: a hint of what is in store for his own Gaelic tongue and civilization.»

soldier who, as Csilla Bertha underlines (2006: 161), nurtures that kind of fascination for Gaelic culture that Said (1978) would no doubt let fall into 'Orientalism':

> Yes, it is a rich language, Lieutenant, full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope of self-deception – a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method to reply to ... inevitabilities. […] But remember that words are signals, counters. They are not immortal. And it can happen – to use an image you'll understand – it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact. (*Trans.* II. i 42-3)

The schoolmaster Hugh is arguably the most ambiguous character in *Translations*. As his words reveal throughout the text, his own attachment to Irish and classical languages is simultaneously heartfelt and subtly object of mockery[7]. Hugh is lucidly aware of the passage of time: in this respect, the school-hedge itself, which he leads with the utmost zeal, is an institution of the past, what French historian Pierre Nora would call a *lieu de mémoire*[8]. As Assmann (2011: 292) explains,

> [a] place of commemoration is what remains when a tradition has ended and an event has lost its context. In order that such a place may survive and maintain its relevance, it requires a story to support it that can replace the lost milieu. The shattered fragments of a lost or destroyed way of life are used to

[7] As one stage description of Act Two (Scene One) informs us, «he [Hugh] is physically and mentally jaunty and alert – almost self-consciously jaunty and alert. Indeed, as the scene progresses, one has the sense that he is deliberately parodying himself» (*Trans.* II i 40). The self-irony of the main character fits into Friel's declared resolution of not wanting to write «a threnody on the death of the Irish language» (Friel 1999: 75).

[8] Published in the mid-1980s, *Les lieux de mémoire*, monumental work in three volumes under the direction of French historian Pierre Nora (1996-1998 [1984-1986]), is considered a founding text of the interdisciplinary field of memory studies.

> authenticate stories that in turn become reference points for a new cultural memory. The places require explanation, and their relevance and meaning can only be maintained through stories that are continually transmitted.

The objects that make up the setting of the hedge-school in *Translations* can be thought exactly as «fragments of a lost or destroyed way of life», that of nineteenth-century rural Ireland. As the first stage description informs us, scattered around the stage are many of those household utensils which might now be found in an ethnographic museum:

> The hedge-school is held in a disused barn or hay-shed or byre. Along the back wall are the remains of five or six stalls - wooden posts and chains - where cows were once milked and bedded. A double door left, large enough to allow a cart to enter. A window right. A wooden stairway without a banister leads to the upstairs living-quarters (off) of the schoolmaster and his son. Around the room are broken and forgotten implements: a cart-wheel, some lobster-pots, farming tools, a battle of hay, a churn, etc. (*Trans.* I 11)

As the choice of nouns (*remains*), adjectives (*disused*, *broken*, *forgotten*), and adverbs (*once*) makes clear, the hedge-school is a place of yore: no matter if it is «a disused barn, or hay-shed or byre», as long as these places can be easily recognised by the audience as integral elements of Irish traditional culture. The 'rich' languages spoken in this *lieu de mémoire* help to maintain its fragile order seemingly meaningful and intact, utterly detached from historical mutability. As Françoise Waquet (2001: 257) suggests with regard to Latin, «[m]uch was made of [the] tradition which conferred on the classical tongue something signally lacking from ever-changing modern vernaculars: a 'privilege of perpetuity'».

The classical languages spoken in *Translations* are not merely displays of erudite knowledge on the characters' part, but help substantiate, with their supposed timelessness, the very linguistic world of the play. Arguably following George Steiner's reflections on

the importance of the individual 'personal lexicon' in cultural models of translation[9], Brian Friel expressed his determination of making the role of language in the private sphere the central focus of the play. In one diary entry dated 6 July 1979, however, he laments that the making of *Translations* is not living up to his own expectations:

> One of the mistakes of the direction in which the play is presently pulling is the almost wholly public concern of the theme: how does the eradication of the Irish language and the substitution of English affect this particular society? How long can a society live without its tongue? Public questions; issues for politicians; and that's what is wrong with the play now. The play must concern itself only with the exploration of the dark and private places of individual souls. (Friel 1999: 77)

Although *Translations*, as a play on the loss of the Irish language, performed in Northern Ireland in the midst of the 'Troubles', cannot possibly set the political issues aside, Friel did manage to convincingly sketch the private linguistic dimension of the characters. Analysing each of them would go beyond the scope of this study: in this discussion it is worth considering how the knowledge of classical languages differently shapes the individual consciousness of the two 'intellectual' figures of the play, namely the learned pupil Jimmy Jack and the hedge-schoolmaster Hugh.

[9] George Steiner's seminal *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (1975) is one of Friel's sources for the play (Friel 1999: 74). For Steiner (1975: 45-6) every model of communication implies 'translation', i.e. «a vertical or horizontal transfer of significance» starting at the level of the idiolect: «Each living person draws, deliberately or in immediate habit, on two sources of linguistic supply: the current vulgate corresponding to his level of literacy, and a private thesaurus. The latter is inextricably a part of his subconscious, of his memories so far as they may be verbalized, and of the singular, irreducibly specific ensemble of his somatic and psychologic identity.»

3. JIMMY AND HUGH: THE 'LITERARY PEASANT' AND THE 'MODERN INTELLECTUAL'

At the end of Act Three, as Hugh uncannily acknowledges the new cultural impact of the British presence in Ireland, a revelatory line he utters makes explicit the fundamental opposition between Jimmy and himself, with regard to the interrelationship between language and experience. Addressing his son Owen, Hugh stresses the necessity of being aware of the changing milieu in which one lives: «We must learn those new names. [...] We must learn where we live. [...] it is not the literal past, the 'facts' of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language. James has ceased to make that discrimination» (*Trans*. III 66). Jimmy, with his 'crush' on the wisdom goddess Athene and his enthusiastic and free intermingling of Greek and Irish mythology, seems to be inhabiting an ahistorical age which strikingly recalls the Homeric epic poems he is so fond of. In this respect, Jimmy, whose very name and passion for the *Odyssey* – as well as his insistence on calling its eponymous hero Ulysses (instead of the expected Greek form 'Odysseus') – might be a not too subtle reference to James Joyce, Ireland's most eclectic man of culture, can be conceived as the embodiment of what Seamus Deane (1985: 37) calls the 'literary peasant', a mythologized figure promoted by the Celtic Revival movement of the early twentieth century, under the intellectual aegis of Lady Augusta Gregory and William Butler Yeats. As such, Jimmy is the depositary of a century-long 'cultural archive'[10], which he however leaves unprocessed, i.e. he does not bestow new significance on the languages and cultures of the past, given that, as

[10] Following Assmann's formulation (2011: 124): «We are all familiar with the process of disposal by forgetting, the irretrievable loss from generation to generation of valued knowledge and live experiences. But not all is lost forever; a small segment is assembled and preserved in cultural archives, and it is possible for historical knowledge to reclaim some of these disembodied relics and abandoned materials and perhaps even reconnect them with the functional dimension of cultural memory.»

Assmann suggests (2011: 125), «in order for memory to act as a guiding force, its elements must be suited to the purpose, that is, they must be endowed with relevance and be configured to provide meaning». Jimmy does not make memory 'functional' to the present: he lives in that pristine mythological past which Friel (1999: 74) is so suspicious of[11].

Hugh is the other 'intellectual' of the play, but in a radically opposite way. Not only does the schoolmaster show a more sceptical, complex and modern sensibility towards the role and potentialities of language: he also envisages its subjugating political power. It is not a chance that he is attached to Virgil's *Aeneid* as much as Jimmy cherishes the *Odyssey*: in the Latin epic poem, language and imperialism are closely intertwined. T.S. Eliot (1957: 125) famously asserted that «Virgil made of Roman civilization in his poetry something better than it really was» and his literary enterprise contributed so vigorously and influentially to the construction of the idea of the *imperium Romanum* in Western cultural memory[12], that «We are all, so far as we inherit the civilization of Europe, still citizens of the Roman Empire» (1957: 130)[13]. As the next section will attempt

[11] See also Seamus Deane (1985: 14): «The nostalgia was consistently directed towards a past so deeply buried that it was not recoverable except as sentiment.»

[12] Starting from the late medieval era, English literature was extensively informed by the myth of the *translatio imperii*. Highly influential in this respect was the *History of the Kings of Britain*, written by the twelfth-century chronicler Geoffrey of Monmouth. The Tudors and the Stuarts used this source to trace their ancestry back to Brutus, founder of Britannia and descendant of Aeneas. Major literary figures of the English Renaissance, such as Edmund Spenser and William Shakespeare, resorted frequently to the myth. Cf. Hadfield (1997; 2004) and James (1997). The latter study focuses specifically on the significance of the 'Troy legend' in Shakespeare's plays.

[13] The implications of Eliot's remark are discussed in great depth by Ika Willis (2007: 343-4): «[I]f Empire is defined not in terms of the existence of a political entity whose boundaries are inscribed in terrestrial space, but in terms of the channels of information transmission that it inaugurates and maintains, then the survival and legibility of Roman texts - the Roman archive - would indeed entail the continued political domination of the Roman Empire.»

to demonstrate, Hugh's references to the *Aeneid* do provide a valuable key to shed light on what 'translation' between cultures might ultimately mean.

4. *TRANSLATIO IMPERII*? MODELS OF 'CULTURAL TRANSLATION' IN FRIEL'S PLAY

At the very end of the play, Hugh quotes Juno's complaint for the doomed fate of Carthage[14], from Book I of the *Aeneid*:

> *Urbs antiqua fuit* – there was an ancient city which, 'tis said, Juno loved above all the lands. And it was the goddess's aim and cherished hope that here should be the capital of all nations – should the fate perchance allow that. Yet in truth she discovered that a race was springing from Trojan blood to overthrow some day these Tyrian towers – a people *late regem belloque superbum* – kings of broad realms and proud in war who would come forth for Lybia's downfall – such was – such was the course – such was the course ordained – ordained by fate... What the hell's wrong with me? Sure I know it backways. I'll begin again, *Urbs antiqua fuit* [...]. (*Trans*. III 68)

Hugh seems to empathise with the defeated peoples of Virgil's poem, thereby resorting to the anticolonial metaphor of the Irish as 'Carthaginians' which is so widely current in contemporary Irish literature, as demonstrated compellingly by Elizabeth Butler Cullingford (1996). The learned Hugh seems to distinguish quite clearly what the classical scholar Adam Parry (1963) called «the two voices of Virgil's *Aeneid*»: the glorious voice of the victors and the

[14] The end of *Translations*, both for its clear intertextual reference to the *Aeneid* and its repetitive quality – with the character's voice gradually vanishing before the curtain falls, might recall the concluding lines of *The Fire Sermon*, the third section of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (ll. 307-311): «To Carthage then I came / Burning burning burning burning / O Lord Thou pluckest me out / O Lord Thou pluckest / burning» (cf. Eliot 1940).

faint voice of the vanquished, which sets forth «the regretful sense of the limitations of human action in a world where you've got to end up on the right side or perish» (Parry 1963: 69). What is more, by quoting Juno's words – and symbolically falling in a mnemonic lapse –, Hugh is hinting at the idea of *translatio imperii*, "transfer of power" or "succession of empires", about which revolved the medieval philosophy of history, popularized by the work of Hugh of St. Victor (see Le Goff 1988: 171-2). Closely associated is the idea of *translatio studii* or *translatio sapientiae*, i.e. transference of cultural power[15]. In a brilliant essay, Karlheinz Stierle explores the significance of the latter concept, starting with an introductory remark on the meaning of the word *translatio* itself:

> In Medieval Latin *translatio*, which has its echoes in the Romance languages as well as in English, can mean translation and displacement as well. In the Renaissance, however, with its new humanistic conception of *translation*, a separation between

[15] Le Goff (1988: 172) explains the significance of *translatio studii* by referring to the work of Richard of Bury. The latter described the transfer of cultural power by imagining the Roman goddess Minerva as a personification of knowledge 'touring' the succeeding human civilizations: «The admirable Minerva made a tour of all the human races and carried herself from one extremity of the world to another to bestow herself on all peoples. We observe that she has already passed through the Indians, the Babylonians, the Eyptians, the Greeks, the Arabs and the Latins. She has already abandoned Athens, left Rome, forgotten Paris; she has just arrived happily in Britain, the most illustrious of the isles, the microcosm of the universe…» (quoted in Le Goff 1988: 172). Jimmy's passionate obsession with Athene, whom he is declaredly going to marry «at Christmas» (*Trans*. III 65), might be read as a symbolic wink of the eye to the privileged position that cultural achievements have enjoyed throughout Irish history, making up, in a way, for the deficiencies in all the other domains of national development. In Act Two of the play, Hugh warns Yolland against the latter's uncritical praise of the rich cultural heritage of Ireland: «We like to think we endure around truths immemorially posited. […] Indeed, Lieutenant. A rich language. A rich literature. You'll find, sir, that certain cultures expend on their vocabularies and syntax acquisitive energies and ostentations entirely lacking in their material lives. I suppose you could call us a spiritual people» (*Trans.* II i 42).

> *translatio* and *traductio* is characteristic for the Romance languages, whereas translation in English keeps its medieval senses. (Stierle 1996: 55-6)

Considering the postcolonial preoccupations pervading the play, it is reasonable to argue that Friel plays thematically with both senses of the English word: i.e. *translatio* as both "translation" and "displacement". Facing the new political and cultural power of Britain, the Irish-speaking population is an undeniable victim of displacement: yet, the twin ideas of *translatio imperii* and *translatio sapientiae*, of vertical transference of power and culture, can be subversively reverted and ultimately dismissed by 'translating' the English language into one's own. In this respect, Richard Kearney maintains that the «instances of displacement consolidate Friel's message about the mistaken substitution of Irish by English. But Friel, like Hugh, recognizes that this mistake is an irreversible, if regrettable, inevitability of history» (Kearney 1988: 141). Hugh accepts the «inevitability of history», i.e. *translatio* as displacement, but he also accepts the challenge of *translatio* as 'translation'. In this respect, the *Aeneid*, as a reference text for *Translations*, has yet another reading to offer. Not only is Virgil's epic a poem about the unfathomable and unchangeable forces of fate, about the vertical transference of political and cultural power: it is also, simultaneously, a poem of 'cultural encounters', which promotes the idea of a constant horizontal 'translation', i.e. peaceful coexistence of different peoples[16]. Let us consider Juno's speech in Book XII of the epic, which symmetrically mirrors that of Book I. The Queen of the Gods begs Jupiter not to consent that the Trojans led by Aeneas destroy the

[16] According to Stierle (1996: 64-5), the idea of 'horizontal translation' first originated in the Renaissance, thanks to the work of Petrarch: «Petrarch is the first to live in different worlds and to enjoy the complexity of this experience. The experience of the copresence of cultures is perhaps the most important aspect of what we call Renaissance. It is the fundamental plurality of the Renaissance that is the condition of a new dimension of dialogue. With Petrarch begins the dominance of the horizontal over the vertical axis of *translatio*.»

culture of the vanquished Italians. She suggests that the two communities could peacefully merge, each retaining their own cultural habits and costumes:

> *illud te, nulla fati quod lege tenetur,*
> *pro Latio obtestor, pro maiestate tuorum:*
> *cum iam conubiis pacem, felicibus, esto,*
> *component, cum iam leges et foedera iungent,*
> *ne vetus indigenas nomen mutare Latinos*
> *neu Troas fieri iubeas Teucrosque vocari*
> *aut vocem mutare viros aut vertere vestem.*
> *sit Latium, sint Albani per saecula reges,*
> *sit Romana potens Itala virtute propago:*
> *occidit, occideritque sinas cum nomine Troia.*
>
> (*Aen*. 12, 819-828)[17]

The above-quoted passage strikingly recalls the main themes of *Translations*: intercommunal unions, the re-naming of places, the risk of cultural annihilation in the face of the hegemonic imperialist threat[18]. While stoically and somewhat realistically accepting 'the law of Fate' (*nulla fati quod lege tenetur*) which had caused the defeat of the Italians – «even before making her request Juno specifies that it does not contravene what is fated» (Tarrant 2012: 299), Juno does peremptorily reject the idea of the uninterrupted continuity of the Trojan power. D.C. Feeney (1991: 150-1) described Juno as «the principal embodiment of the anarchy which threatens the progress of

[17] "But I entreat you for the sake of Latium and the honour of your own kin, to allow what the law of Fate does not forbid. When at last their marriages are blessed – I offer no obstruction – when at last they come together in peace and make their laws and treaties together, do not command the Latins to change their ancient name in their own land, to become Trojans and be called Teucrians. They are men. Do not make them change their voice or their native dress. Let there be Latium. Let the Alban kings live on from generation to generation and the stock of Rome be made mighty by the manly courage of Italy. Troy has fallen. Let it lie, Troy and the name of Troy" (Translation by David West, London, Penguin, 1991, p. 328).

[18] For a thorough analysis of the quoted passage of the *Aeneid*, see Richard Tarrant's commentary (2012: 299-301).

poem and empire […] an intractable emblem of the intractable and unpredictable lurchings of the historical process.» The Roman goddess believes that a new culture ought to emerge, where the voice of the vanquished can still be powerfully heard. In like manner, Hugh, at the end of *Translations*, seems to realize exactly this very potential when, pointing at the Name-Book with the new toponyms compiled by Lieutenant Yolland for the British Ordnance Survey, states that «We must learn those new names. […] We must learn where we live. We must learn to make them our own. We must make them our new home» (*Trans*. III 66).

Brian Arkins (1991: 208-9) has brought to the fore the important cultural legacy of Hugh's position, that led to the birth of Hiberno-Irish and the most frequent tendency of using words of Greek and Latin origin in Anglo-Irish poetry and prose:

> From one point of view […] the language of the colonizer has triumphed over the language of the colonized, and this relinquishing of Irish must be counted as loss. From another point of view, however, the acquisition of English in the form of Hiberno-English that preserves features of both Gaelic syntax and Elizabethan pronunciation must be counted as gain. […] Part of the achievement of writers like Yeats and Joyce in their use of English lies in their appropriation of the Greek and Latin that Hugh and Jimmy Jack speak so fluently.

This crucial ambiguity, implying simultaneously cultural loss and cultural potential, makes the ending of Friel's play problematically unresolved[19]. Both *Translations* and the *Aeneid* are open to multiple readings, resisting any one-sided interpretation: this is because in one single language many a voice can speak; both text are ultimately

[19] In her discussion of the Irish and British reception of the play, Marilynn J. Richtarik (1994: 64 and *passim*) notes that the substantial feature of *Translations* lies ultimately in its 'open' ending, which leaves an unsolvable «gulf of incomprehension» between the Irish and the English culture.

'political'[20]. As Patrick Maley (2011: 113) felicitously puts it, «*Translations* calls neither for idealist nostalgia nor positivist identity, but for political progress through humanist engagement.» In this respect, what Friel and Virgil have in common is their hinting at the possibility of what Sanford Budick and Wolfgang Iser defined as «the space between», where, in spite of the undeniable difficulties and losses that 'translation' implies, meaning is after all constantly and successfully produced:

> Whenever we attempt to translate we are pitched into a crisis of alterity. The experience of secondary otherness then emerges from the encounter with untranslatability. Even if we are always defeated by translation, culture as a movement toward shared consciousness may emerge from the defeat. Thus the story of culture does not end with the experience of that which is nothing more than a secondary otherness. In fact, the multiple half-lives of affiliation known as culture may begin to be experienced, as potentialities, only there. (Budick 1996: 22)

5. CONCLUSION

Probably addressing a sleep-drunk Jimmy at the end of Act Three, Hugh maintains that «To remember everything is a form of madness» (*Trans*. III 67). Soon after, the latter forgets. He cannot bring back to his memory the lines of the *Aeneid* following *Urbs antiqua fuit*…

It is not easy to make sense of this sudden amnesia, this unexpected 'memory loss'. Does Hugh believe that Ireland is also an *Urbs antiqua*, which, like Carthage, is destined to perish? But does not Carthage still live in the language of the people which razed it to the ground? Nothing – the hedge-schoolmaster seems to think – can bring it back to life: 'Carthage/Ireland' is just one of those «images of the past embodied in language» (*Trans*. III 66), the language of the

[20] For a detailed examination of Virgil as a political writer, see Tarrant (1997), Adler (2003) and Kallendorf (2007).

colonisers. Yet, as Hugh puts it, «we must never cease *renewing* those images; because once we do, we fossilize» (*Ibid*., italics mine). To do so, it is necessary to embrace the language of the 'victors' with all the irresolvable questions that this implies, as Brian Friel himself did by choosing English as the language of a play set in the rural 'Gaelic-speaking' Ireland of the nineteenth century.

On 5 November 1979, as soon as he finished the script of the play, Friel sketched a similar 'Darwinian' view of cultural adaptation: «All art is a diary of evolution; markings that seemed true of and for their time; adjustments in stance and disposition; opening to what seemed the persistence of the moment. Map-makings» (Friel 1999: 78). That is why Hugh thinks that timeless perpetuity is by itself a meaningless construction. At the end of the play Maire asks him to give a definition of the English word 'always':

> Maire: Master, what does the English word 'always' mean?
> Hugh: *Semper – per omnia saecula*. The Greeks called it '*aei*'. It's not a word I'd start with. It's a silly word, girl. (*Trans*. III 68)

The 'silliness' of the word 'always' might derive from its incompatibility with the very meaning of the key term of the play, i.e. 'translation', which necessarily implies a 'movement' and a 'change'. Hugh refuses the timeless mythical world in which his foil Jimmy lives and becomes the prototype of all the modern Irish writers who «were obliged to find some way of dealing with history, a category which includes language, landscape, and the various ideologies of the recovered past which grew out of them» (Deane 1985: 14). The writer has to take an active role in the process of representation, making those «images of the past» Hugh refers to valid for the present time. In *Translations*, the classics provide an extremely rich reserve of those 'images', proving that it is in the constant dialogue between classicality and modernity, itself a place of 'translation' or a 'space-between', that new questions can be posed and new meanings constantly found.

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