

AIDAN O'MALLEY

Re-Translations, or, Can the Postcolonial Construct a Home? A Reading of Brian Friel's *The Communication Cord*.

As we will hear, an explicit impulse behind Brian Friel's 1982 Field Day play *The Communication Cord* was the wish to formulate a response to his 1980 *Translations*, which inaugurated the Field Day enterprise. This paper will suggest that this response took the form of a translation or re-translation; that, in other words, *The Communication Cord* can be thought of as a translation of *Translations*. *Translations* focused on the activities associated with the Ordnance Survey in Ireland in the 1830s, in particular on the Anglicisation of Irish place-names that accompanied their cartographic activities. Thought of in this fashion, *The Communication Cord* becomes a translation of a play in which certain processes of translation are explored in a colonial context, and so it re-enacts these processes, but this time in a postcolonial context. Hence, this paper will explore the motives informing this (re-)translation of a colonial encounter through a reading of the manner in which the dynamics of translation are re-performed in the postcolonial setting of *The Communication Cord*.

A detour must first be embarked upon. The use of the terms "colonial" and "postcolonial" as descriptive categories in Irish historical and political studies is by no

means unproblematic. Within the economy of a presentation such as this, one recent excerpt from the debate around these terms will suffice. In his recent, wide-ranging study *Ireland and Empire*, Stephen Howe argues against what he sees as the homogenising effect of the use of these terms. For him,

Ireland under the Union was... a strange constitutional hybrid: quite unlike any part of the subject Empire in that it was represented—on the whole, fairly represented, proportional to population—in the Imperial Parliament, but unlike any other part of the Kingdom in the presence of ‘colonial’ institutions headed by the Lord Lieutenantcy.¹

Rather than offer a critical examination of Howe’s tendency to elide questions of power relations—collapsing them into anodyne phrases, such as “the inevitable asymmetry of relations between a relatively large (and formerly globally dominant) state and a very small one”²—the attention here might more usefully shift to a central aspect of his critique of the use of postcolonial theory in contemporary Irish cultural studies. As a consequence of his description of the hybrid nature of colonialism in Ireland, his main objection to postcolonial theory is the way in which such strategies tend to posit a uniform experience of colonialism across continents. In his view, movements such as negritude and African or Asian cultural nationalism have little relevance to an analysis of contemporary Ireland.³

However, while Friel has insisted on reading Ireland in colonial terms, he has also rejected this generalising tendency, thus suggesting that a postcolonial perspective can be somewhat more nuanced than Howe’s characterisation of it. In an interview with Fintan O’Toole, Friel was asked if he was “aware of being almost canonized after *Translations*?” His reply helps us to begin the process of trying to locate the interstitial site he wanted to reclaim by writing *The Communication Cord*.

... ah no, that’s very strong. But it was treated much too respectfully. ... when you get notices especially from outside the island, saying ‘If you want to know what happened in Cuba, if you want to know what happened in

Chile, if you want to know what happened in Vietnam, read *Translations*,³ that's nonsense. And I just can't accept that sort of pious rubbish.⁴

Thus, it could be argued that Friel wrote *The Communication Cord* as his translation of *Translations* in response to other critical translations of the play that made him uncomfortable. *Translations*, it should be noted, inspired an immediate and intense critical reaction. This reaction might provisionally be divided into three overlapping categories. In the first place, there were a few more romantically inclined nationalist critics who saw it as an evocation of a lost Irish idyll.⁵ Then there were those on the opposite side of that same coin, anti-nationalist critics, who held it to be a dangerous play which refurbished old nationalist myths.⁶ However, the predominant critical reaction has been summed up by Marilyn Richter thus: "Within a few years the play had acquired the status of a classic. *Translations* is now generally regarded as what Michael Sheridan declared it to be two days after it opened: a watershed in Irish theatre."⁷ This paper will argue that these critical responses are all essentialising and, as such, were considered to be "pious" by Friel. When, in the same interview, Fintan O'Toole asked him if he was "consciously attempting an antidote to *Translations* when [he was] writing *The Communication Cord*" Friel agreed, adding:

I was being categorized in some sort of a way that I didn't feel easy about, and it seemed to me that a farce would disrupt that kind of categorizing. There's risks involved in doing that sort of thing. I think it's a risky enterprise doing a farce.⁸

Thus, as a farce, *The Communication Cord* sends up forms of postcolonial pious nationalism and, in doing so, undermines both the romantic nationalist and stridently anti-nationalist responses to *Translations*.

Of course, if *The Communication Cord* is to be considered as a translation, we are impelled to reread *Translations* as an "original." But, this "original" is, amongst other things, a performance of translation, or, rather, to invoke Kearney's reading of

the play which will be explored here later, a dramatic performance of the tensions between two different modes of translation—between what he has termed “ontological” and “positivist” attitudes to language.⁹ Thus, while James Simmons has rather elegantly described *The Communication Cord* as a case of Friel “pissing on his own monument,”¹⁰ this paper will propose that Friel’s relationship with his monument was of a different order: as a translation, *The Communication Cord*, to adapt Benjamin’s metaphor, uncovers anew the “always already” fragmented nature of the monument.¹¹ This fragmentation was, of course, performed in *Translations* itself, as it had evoked the impossibility of a return to a whole “original.”¹² Thought of in this fashion, *The Communication Cord* might indeed be framed as a form of retranslation. This, if one follows Benjamin, is a risky procedure. Translations are untranslatable, according to him, “because of the looseness with which meaning attaches to them.”¹³ This looseness is the result of the travesty inherent in translation. Benjamin had earlier described the relationship between what he called the untranslatable nucleus and the translatable words of the original in this manner:

the relationship between content and language is quite different in the original and the translation. While content and language form a certain unity in the original, like a fruit and its skin, the language of the translation envelops its content like a royal robe with ample folds. For it signifies a more exalted language than its own and thus remains unsuited to its content, overpowering and alien.¹⁴

Thus, *The Communication Cord* might be read as a travesty of a travesty: an attempt to loosen the robes that had been draped on *Translations* by farcically broadening the gap between signifier and signified, in order to re-clothe it, perhaps, in the Emperor’s new clothes.

Of course, travesty is also a suitable *genre* for a play that satirises elements of postcolonial Irish society, by showing how in paying homage to nationalist pieties, they have assumed mock-imperial clothing. Seamus Deane, in his *General*

Introduction to the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, has read this act of travesty as precisely a feat of retranslation:

Nationalism, cultural or political, is no more than the inverted image of the colonialism it seeks to replace. It too is an act of translation or even of retranslation. The assumption that it shares with colonialism is the existence of an original condition that must be transmitted, restored, recuperated, and which must replace the fallen condition which at present obtains.¹⁵

Hence, Friel uncovers this congruence by employing a strategy of retranslation. If *Translations* is a play of translation, *The Communication Cord* is a play of retranslation: a play in which the nationalist/postcolonial translation of colonialism is performed as a retranslation of colonial translation strategies.¹⁶ This performance is the focus of this paper, which will now propose a reading of the role of the blustering senator, Dr. Donovan, in the light of this travesty, as he is the character who most explicitly personifies this disposition in the farce.

In the first place, his name must be considered, as it is the name of a translator/“namer.” John O’Donovan was the foremost scholar of the Irish language of his age and was employed by the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s to investigate Irish place-names. His job was to travel the length and breadth of Ireland to ascertain the most correct version of a place’s name, and then to advise on the orthography to be used on the maps. He thus embodied the precarious ambivalence of the *traduttore traditore* (“translator traitor”). While he was employed in a colonising operation—participating in what Friel termed “the naming-taming process”¹⁷—his work also recuperated and salvaged a huge amount of local knowledge that might otherwise have been lost. So much so, that the contemporary nationalist writer, Thomas Davis, advocated studying the output of the Survey as a part of a strategy of reclaiming “Ireland for the Irish.”¹⁸ O’Donovan’s accounts of his work for the Survey informed Friel’s writing of *Translations*, and are partially reflected in the character of Owen.¹⁹

Senator Donovan in *The Communication Cord* also participates in the naming process. This is his reaction to Tim's invention of a character called "Jack the Cod:"

"I love that. Call a man Jack the Cod and you tell me his name and his profession and that he's not very good at his profession. Concise, accurate and nicely malicious. Beautiful!"²⁰ Donovan's style of reading this name can be explored by returning to Kearney's reading of the competing attitudes to language in *Translations*: between what he has termed a "positivist" attitude to language, which he identifies with the colonial effort, and a Heideggerian, "ontological" disposition, which finds expression in the etymological excavations in which the hedge school participates. In order to amplify these distinctions, Kearney will be quoted at some length here. He holds that the "ontological" approach celebrates language,

as a way to truth in the Greek sense of the term, *A-lethia*, meaning un-forgetfulness, un-concealing, dis-closure. Language tells us truth by virtue of its capacity to unlock the secret privacies of our historical Being (the 'interiority of the heart's space').... Language houses Being by recalling things from their past oblivion, thus attuning us once again to our lost identities, enabling us to re-member (*an-denken*) our alienated, dis-membered selves....

Friel opposes this *ontological* model of language to the *positivist* use of words as agents of pragmatic progress. This alternative positivist model is perhaps most closely associated with the philosophy of the British Empiricism, which served in recent centuries as the ideological mainstay of British colonialism.... Positivism maintains that words are mechanically given (*positum*)—objects in a world of similar objects. They are eminently unmysterious entities to be used as instruments for the representation, mapping or classification of reality. And the reductionist goal of positivism is to produce an exact decoding of the world by establishing a one-to-one correlation between *words* and the *facts* of empirical experience. Language is thus reduced to a utilitarian weapon for the colonization of Being.²¹

These distinctions mark out two radically different approaches to translation that can reasonably be said to lie close to the heart of the concerns of *Translations*. Moreover, they help one to appreciate the nature of Donovan's travesty. His farcical reading of "Jack the Cod" attempted to perform in a more "ontological" manner, as an insight into the man's origins. However, its style was resolutely "positivist." Its effort to cast

itself in an “ontological” light is what Donovan would see as necessary deference to a supposedly purer past. In short, it is an act of piety, the absurdity of which is reinforced by the fact that it is in any case an invented name. Indeed, the play, as a farce, is weighed down by a plethora of invented names and mistaken identities; names that set out to mislead and misrepresent, to gain short-term advantages. Donovan is Teddy to his French mistress, Evette, and Dr. Bollocks for the German, who is, at various stages, called Barney the Banks, Barney Munich and Willie Hausenbach. In this manner, *The Communication Cord* re-enacts, in excess, *Translations*’ portrayal of the limits of a “positivist” translation of names. However, it could also be re-posing a question about the possible nature of an “ontological” approach. In *Translations* this question was inevitably obscured by the fact that the “positivist” style of translation was a colonial imposition, and so the “ontological” resistance to this tended to be equated with an attitude that would posit the untranslatability of proper names, as a way of preserving their inner meaning.²² Here though, the farcical foregrounding of naming and role-playing places under question the notion that there might be a pure and secret proper name to be found underneath these various aliases. Indeed, perhaps even the desire that Derrida submits is “at work in every proper name” — “translate me, don’t translate me” — is being suggested.²³ This, in other words, would caution against any temptation to view the “ontological” as an entirely pure alternative to “positivism.” If language contains a call for translation, contamination is inevitable; thus, perhaps the optimum translation strategy must be one in which the unresolvable strife of the “bizarre hendiadys,” “necessary and impossible,”²⁴ is expressly felt.

Thus, it is with no little irony that we learn from Donovan’s daughter Susan, towards the end of a play in which identities and names are entirely malleable, that

Donovan's name is "Patrick Mary Pious."²⁵ As was mentioned earlier, Donovan is the embodiment of piety, and as such initially finds himself very much at home in the house that is the setting for this play. It is located in the "present" in a restored thatched cottage in Ballybeg, the fictional townland in Donegal in which many of Friel's plays are set including *Translations*, which bore witness to the change of its name from Baile Beag to Ballybeg. The opening stage directions, in their description of the interior, also set the stage for the reading here:

*The action takes place in a 'traditional' Irish cottage. ... Every detail of the kitchen and its furnishings is accurate of its time (from 1900 to 1930). But one quickly senses something false about the place. It is too pat, too 'authentic'. It is in fact a restored house, a reproduction, an artefact of today making obeisance to a home of yesterday.*²⁶

As the play opens, this un-lived-in holiday home is being set up as a trap. It belongs to the family of Jack McNeilis, a barrister, and he has hatched a plan to loan it for a couple of hours to his friend Tim Gallagher, a lecturer in linguistics, notably without tenure, who is struggling with a thesis on "Discourse Analysis with Particular Reference to Response Cries."²⁷ By playing the role of host in such a cottage, Tim can impress Donovan—his girlfriend Susan's father—who is noted for his appreciation of such Irish antiquities. Indeed, he is immediately enchanted by the place, agreeing with Jack's deliberately parodic description of it: "This is where we all come from. This is our first cathedral. This shaped all our souls. This determined our first pieties."²⁸

Moreover, Donovan finds himself in communication with the place; it is the reification of a style of translation that speaks to him:

This speaks to me, Tim. This whispers to me. Does that make sense to you?

...
This is the touchstone. That landscape, that sea, this house—this is the apotheosis.

...
I suppose what I'm really saying is that for me this is the absolute verity.²⁹

This paper proposes that this house, as an artefact of today making obeisance to the past, represents a piously translated construction, one which, in producing an effect of authenticity, would seek to deny its status as a translation. This edifice will now be partially deconstructed in order to locate the correspondences between a pious and “positivist” translation in their flawed relationships with the past. In short, if one takes Heidegger’s notion of “imaginings that are visible inclusions of the alien in the sign of the familiar”³⁰ as a possible definition of an “ontological” disposition, the pious and “positivist” attitudes would tend to ignore the otherness of the past.

This is most vividly revealed in Donovan’s misadventure with the post and chains that were used to tether the cattle in the house. He is at first overjoyed to see them, tellingly noting that they have been “incorporated...into the kitchen as of course it should be because that it is exactly as it was!”³¹ He then decides to act out a pious historical scenario to illustrate how these posts and chains function. In doing so, he literally traps himself in this recreated, idealised past, and spends most of the rest of the play tied up in the posts and chains. The pretence that the house is not a translation is exploded by the fact that the clasp of the post and chains is rusted and does not work properly; the whole contraption is literally of no use. His unnatural posture, of course, uncovers Donovan’s real false piety, and he turns on the house:

This determined our first priorities! This is our native simplicity! Don’t give me that shit!

...
...This is the greatest dump....³²

Furthermore, this is also an act of travesty, in that Donovan has assumed the role of a cow and now finds himself caught in his positivist pretence. Indeed, his repeated “ooohs” of discomfort come across as a series of bovine utterances. The nature of this travesty perhaps inevitably evokes the Circe episode of *The Odyssey*, and it may be useful to linger at this analogy (which may itself be a travestied reading), in order

to interrogate, in a deliberately speculative fashion, the notion of piety and its relationship with the past once more.

As we know, in order to continue his eccentric journey from Circe's island, Odysseus had to descend to the House of Death and consult with Tiresias and crucially confront his dead ancestors and friends. He is specifically enjoined to practise appropriate rites of piety before encountering the dead. In effect, this piety involves the difficult coming to terms with the fact that his loved ones are no more than shades; indeed, he tries and fails three times to embrace his mother's shade.³³ Thus, not only is there no joy to be gained for Odysseus by encountering the past, but he also literally cannot grasp his past; it is, once more, an "impossible and necessary" task. Donovan, on the other hand, assumed a full comprehension of his past, until he found himself ensnared in its grip. Hence, tentatively, it is suggested here that the difference between necessary piety and its false reflection can be witnessed in Odysseus' need to mourn, and so endure the experience of the lack of presence, as opposed to Donovan's celebratory recreation of the past, which produces nothing more than a pantomime. As de Man has hinted, mourning exists on the other side of intelligibility; it is the figure *par excellence* for non-comprehension, based as it is on the lack of acceptance or comprehension of the absence of the other.³⁴ Thus, to use a vocabulary relevant to the processes of translation, mourning might be thought of as a decisive recognition of the fissure between the sign and the signified. In other words, and to push this once more in a direction suggested by de Man's reading of Rousseau, it underscores the inherent metaphorical nature of language.³⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this would appear to return us to what might be called the thesis at the heart of *The Communication Cord*; as might be recalled, Tim is struggling with a PhD on discourse analysis and response cries. The nature of his

problems might be guessed at from his description of his work to Jack early in the play. He proposes a rather strict, indeed, one might say positivist-style, codification of the functions and processes of discourse: “Language. An agreed code. I encode my message; I transmit it to you; you receive the message and decode it.”³⁶

Strangely, it would appear that his focus on the role of “response cries” within this code is what is deconstructing this system. When, in the midst of Tim’s lengthy descriptions, Jack interjects an exclamatory “God,” Tim seizes on this:

A response cry! And that’s really the kernel of my thesis. A response cry blurted out as an involuntary reaction to what you’ve just heard. And what does it tell me? Does your ‘God’ say: I never knew that before? Does it say: This is fascinating—please continue? Does it say: Yes, I do desire to share your experience? Does it say: Tim you’re boring me? Or is your expletive really involuntary? Maybe—because we’re both playing roles, if we’re both playing roles—maybe your ‘God’ is a *pretence* at surprise, at interest, at boredom. And if this is a pretence, why is it a pretence?³⁷

Thus, Tim would appear to be caught between the desire to codify and the knowledge that this is not sufficient: insufficient precisely because even a seemingly involuntary, perhaps one might even say, originary, cry needs to be interpreted. Inscribed within it, in short, is the possibility of metaphor³⁸ —a possibility that cannot be accommodated in a purely “positivist” translation.³⁹

The play ends with another possible travesty, this time with the house collapsing in a Babel-like fashion. As Derrida has reminded us, Babel itself was collapsed by an angry god who resented the Shems’ attempt to make a name for themselves, and so create a linguistic hegemony:

What happens in the Babel episode, in the tribe of the Shems? Notice that the word “shem” already means *name*: Shem equals name. The Shems decide to raise a tower—not just to reach up to the heavens but also, it says in the text, to make a name for themselves. They want to make a name for themselves, and they bear the name of name... how will they do it? By imposing their tongue on the entire universe on the basis of this sublime edification... Had their enterprise succeeded, the universal tongue would have been a particular language imposed by violence, by force, by violent hegemony over the rest of the world. It would not have been a universal

language—for example in the Leibnizian sense—a transparent language to which everyone would have had access. Rather, the master with the most force would have imposed this language on the world and, by virtue of this fact, it would have become the universal tongue.⁴⁰

While this episode has an obvious colonial relevance, its re-staging within *The Communication Cord* renders it also as a postcolonial quandary: how to recuperate one's past and one's ability to name oneself without re-imposing a hegemony based on a pretence that a pure Adamic act of naming is available. Thus, read this way, the collapse of the cottage repeats the lesson of the Tower of Babel, which is also a theme of *Translations*, namely the fact that this Adamic coincidence of sign and signified has been exploded.

In *The Communication Cord* this postcolonial house falls because Tim and Claire lean on the beam that was holding the house up. They had not noticed this as they were engaged in falling in love with each other. Their conversation, a “translation-as-analysis” of Maire and Yolland's dialogue in *Translations*, concerns Tim's need to rethink his thesis:

TIM: We're conversing now but we're not exchanging units, are we?

CLAIRE: I don't think so, are we?

TIM: I don't think we can because I'm not too sure what I'm saying.

CLAIRE: I don't know what you're saying either but I think I know what's implicit in it.

...

TIM: Even if what I'm saying is rubbish?

CLAIRE: Yes.

TIM: Like 'this is our first cathedral'?

CLAIRE: Like that.

TIM: Like 'this is the true centre'?

CLAIRE: I think I know what's implicit in that.

TIM: Maybe the message doesn't matter at all then.

...

CLAIRE: It's the occasion that matters.

TIM: And the reverberations that the occasion generates.

...

CLAIRE: And the desire to sustain the occasion.

TIM: And saying anything, anything at all, that keeps the occasion going.

...

CLAIRE: Maybe even saying nothing.

TIM: Maybe. Maybe silence is the perfect discourse.⁴¹

Hence, some level of meaning might even be uncovered in phrases which had apparently been completely hollowed out in the course of this play. But, in a seeming paradox, in order for these phrases to have meaning, they must resist comprehension. Thus, this house—a reification of a “positivist” travesty, if you will—is brought down by a confirmation of the Heideggerian notion of language as the “house of being,” and this perhaps becomes the necessary and impossible blueprint for the construction of a postcolonial home. Language, in this view, does not say everything explicitly, as something is apparently being withheld as it is spoken.⁴² Echoes of one of Hugh’s final speeches in *Translations*, in which he states that “confusion is not an ignoble condition” and that “[t]o remember everything is a form of madness,”⁴³ might be heard here. Of course, a disposition that claimed to do so would necessarily be an obvious pretence and, as we have seen, this “positivist” pretence of a full comprehension, in a postcolonial no less than in a colonial context, is a hegemonic gesture. In opposition to this, *The Communication Cord* seems to re-posit a difficult counter-hegemonic postcolonial strategy involving simultaneous understanding and confusion, deconstruction and construction; a strategy of movement and resistance to stasis—one, in short, that attends primarily to the unpredictable claims of language. This, indeed, returns us to Friel’s choice of a quotation from Heidegger as a prefatory note in the original programme for *Translations*:

Man behaves as if he were the master of language, whereas in fact it is language which remains his mistress. When this relationship of dominance is inverted, man has recourse to strange contrivances.⁴⁴

Notes

¹ Stephen Howe, *Ireland and Empire: Colonial Legacies in Irish History and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 69.

² *Ibid.*, 147.

³ Hence, Howe subtitles his critique of Field Day, “Fanon comes to the Foyle,” *ibid.*, 110. He summarises his objections to this use of postcolonial theory in the Irish context, 233f.

⁴ Brian Friel, “In Interview With Fintan O’Toole (1982)” in Christopher Murray, ed., *Brian Friel: Essays, Diaries, Interviews 1964-1999* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999, 105-15), 107.

⁵ Desmond Rushe, for instance, in his review of an early performance, articulates a more sentimental view of the play, seeing it as “an astonishing evocation of a time when the flashing-eyed Athene of Grecian saga was as familiar to Donegal peasants as the Grainne of Irish legend.” Cited in Marilyn J. Richtarik, *Acting Between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980-1984* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 56.

⁶ Lynda Henderson, for instance, cites *Translations* as an example of one of the contemporary Irish plays that “bleat plaintively of old wounds.” Lynda Henderson, “A Fondness for Lament” (*Theatre Ireland* 17, 1988-1989, 18-20), 18.

⁷ Richtarik, 29.

⁸ Friel, “In Interview With Fintan O’Toole (1982),” 107.

⁹ Friel indeed has insisted that the play is about “language and only language.” Brian Friel, “Extracts From a Sporadic Diary” in Tim Pat Coogan, ed., *Ireland and the Arts* (London: Namara, 1986, 56-61), 58.

¹⁰ James Simmons, “Brian Friel, Catholic Playwright” [Review of *Selected Plays of Brian Friel*] (*The Honest Ulsterman* 79, 61-66), 66.

¹¹ The reference is to the famous and highly problematic image that Benjamin employs in “The Task of the Translator:” “Fragments of a vessel which are to be glued together must match one another in the smallest details, although they need not be like one another. In the same way a translation, instead of resembling the meaning of the original, must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s mode of signification, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel.” Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire’s *Tableaux Parisiens*” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992, 70-82), 79.

¹² However, it could be argued that a tone of lament pervades *Translations*. Hence, *The Communication Cord*’s radical translation of this tone is a somewhat more unambiguous restatement of the impossibility of such a return.

¹³ Benjamin, 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 76. Problematically for the style of reading employed here, this seems to suggest that the original exists in a state of wholeness. However, this reading can be challenged by a reflection on Benjamin’s image of the amphora which, as can be seen in the quotation above, could potentially express “a certain unity;” on inspection, though, its nature is “always already” fragmented.

¹⁵ *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, General Ed., Seamus Deane (Derry: Field Day; New York: Norton, 1991), xxv.

¹⁶ In so doing, *The Communication Cord* pre-emptly Niranjana’s warning: “[t]he post-colonial translator must be wary of essentialist anti-colonial narratives; in fact, s/he must attempt to deconstruct them, to show their complicity with the master-narrative of imperialism.” Tejaswini Niranjana, *Siting Translation: History, Post-Structuralism, and the Colonial Context* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 167.

¹⁷ Friel, “Extracts From a Sporadic Diary,” 58.

¹⁸ Davis argued, in support of O’Donovan’s work, that, “to be able to keep [Ireland], and use it, and govern it, the men of Ireland must know what it is, what it was, and what it can be made.” Thomas Davis, “The History of Ireland,” *Essays, Literary and Historical* (Dundalk: Dundalgan Press, 1914), 382.

¹⁹ “I keep returning to the same texts: the letters of John O’Donovan, Colby’s *Memoir, A Paper Landscape, The Hedge-Schools of Ireland* by Dowling, Steiner’s *After Babel*.” Friel, “Extracts From a Sporadic Diary,” 57.

²⁰ Brian Friel, *The Communication Cord* (Meath: Gallery Books, 1989), 46.

²¹ Richard Kearney, “The Language Plays of Brian Friel” in *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press; New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988, 123-160), 155-156.

²² Derrida has posed the question thus: “we have a series of names throughout our lives. We are constantly being named by different names which add up, disappear, accumulate, and so on. But what one may well ask oneself is whether, beneath the proper name or names that are in one way or another public knowledge, there does not exist a proper name that is unconscious and secret, a name we are in search of or that the reader or analyst must seek out.... Is it possible not to know one’s own name?... Is it possible for the unconscious proper name—that to which the other addresses him/herself in us, that which responds in us—to be secret?” Jacques Derrida; Rodolphe Gasché; Christie McDonald; Eugenio Donato; Patrick Mahony; Claude Lévesque; Eugene Vance and François Péraldi, “Roundtable on Translation” in Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation. Texts and Discussions With Jacques Derrida*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press; London: Schocken Books, 1985, 93-161), 105-106. While he thinks one must formulate this question, he is wary of its implications, as “however daring it might be, it nevertheless presumes the possibility of some absolute properness, an absolute idiom. However, if an idiom effect or an effect of absolute properness can arise only within a system of relations and differences with something else that is either near or far, then the secret proper name is right away inscribed—structurally and a priori—in a network where it is contaminated by common names. Thus, even this secret proper name would be impossible, at least in a pure state.” *Ibid.*, 107.

²³ Derrida has outlined the operations of this desire thus: “[o]n the one hand, don’t translate me, that is respect me as a proper name, respect my law of the proper name which stands over and above all languages. And, on the other hand, translate me, that is, understand me, preserve me within the universal language, follow my law, and so on.” *Ibid.*, 102.

²⁴ To utilise Thomas Pepper’s description of this tenet of post-structuralism. Thomas Pepper, “Introduction: Ode to X, or, the Essay As Monstrosity,” *Singularities: Extremes of Theory in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 1-19), 6.

²⁵ Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 80.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 15. Tim then repeats these sentiments to Donovan, on his arrival. Donovan’s response is “Amen to that.” *Ibid.*, 34.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

³⁰ Quoted in Kearney, 156.

³¹ Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 34.

³² *Ibid.*, 75.

³³ Thus, she tells him: “My son, my son, the unluckiest man alive!/ This is no deception sent by Queen Persephone./ this is just the way of mortals when we die.” Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 256.

³⁴ The difference between these two approaches might be amplified by being read through de Man’s citation of Rousseau’s *Essai sur l’origine des langues* in his “The Rhetoric of Blindness.” Rousseau’s concern to describe the nature of language as such—to show how it “differs entirely from an instrumental means of communication: for [which] purpose, a mere gesture, a mere cry would suffice”—led him to invoke a comparison of the emotions involved in beholding a physical object and attending to a narrative account. The example that he used is telling: “[t]he sight of the bereaved person will hardly move us to tears, but if we give him time to tell all that he feels, our tears will soon begin to flow.” Thus, as de Man glosses this, a physical object might induce a “misleading synchronism... which creates a false illusion of presence.” This, as has been mentioned, could provide us with a description of Donovan’s sense of the past, which is at home in the “authentically” reproduced cottage. The reading here though will turn on the example that Rousseau employs to illustrate the lack of such a presence in language, as a bereaved person is precisely someone experiencing the lack of a presence. All quotations: Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness: Jacques Derrida’s Reading of Rousseau,” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, rev. ed. (London: Routledge, 1996, 102-41), 131.

³⁵ Rousseau’s allegory of man’s first encounter with another man, and his naming of him as “giant” forms an important element of de Man’s reading of metaphor. See Paul de Man, “Metaphor (Second Discourse),” *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979, 135-159), 149f. Derrida’s reading of this episode in Rousseau is directly cited in de Man, “The Rhetoric of Blindness,” 134.

³⁶ He continues thus to draw out the social relevance of his approach: “If the message sent is clear and distinct, if the code is fully shared and subscribed to, if the message is comprehensively received, then there is a reasonable chance—one, that you will understand what I’m trying to tell you—and two, that

we will have established the beginnings of a dialogue. All social behaviour, the entire social order, depends on words mutually agreed on and mutually understood. Without that agreement, without that shared code, you have chaos.” Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 18-19.

³⁷ Ibid., 19-20.

³⁸ Of course, as has been cited above, Rousseau’s allegory of man’s first encounter with another man, and his naming of him as “giant” is just such an originary scene.

³⁹ Indeed, even the limits of a form of interlinear translation are uncovered in *The Communication Cord*. When Donovan first meets Tim and questions him about the reconstruction of the cottage, Tim obviously knows nothing about the subject and, in response to Donovan’s queries about the style of thatching he had employed, he merely repeats the questions to create a false impression: “DONOVAN: It’s warmer than bent but not as enduring. Do you find that? TIM: It’s not as enduring but it’s warmer. ... DONOVAN: Not as resilient but they last longer. Is that your experience? TIM: They last longer but they’re not as resilient.” Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 33.

⁴⁰ Derrida, *The Ear of the Other*, 100-101.

⁴¹ Friel, *The Communication Cord*, 92.

⁴² Gentzler’s reading of Heidegger is particularly apposite here, as it might be thought to describe the foundations of an “ontological” approach: “Heidegger argues that we do not hear everything, for there is something essential which cannot be heard or read. Something is withheld as language speaks. Words not only reveal what is there— “language is the house of Being” —but language also holds back. If we let language speak for itself, what is revealed is something about the nature of language: words not only show what is there, but also show what is there and at the same time is not.” Edwin Gentzler, *Contemporary Translation Theories* (London: Routledge, 1993), 156.

⁴³ Indeed, as Schlegel ironically put it, non-understanding provides the ground for “the welfare of families and of nations,” as full comprehension would be intolerable. Quoted in Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 163-84), 183.

⁴⁴ This can be embedded in an alternative translation: “Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. When this relation of dominance gets inverted, man hits upon strange maneuvers. ... For, strictly, it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal. Among all the appeals that we human beings, on our part, may help to be voiced, language is the highest and everywhere the first. Language beckons us, at first and then again at the end, towards a thing’s nature.” Martin Heidegger, “... Poetically Man Dwells ...” (“... Dichterisch Wohnet der Mensch ...”), *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 215-216.