

*British Linguistic Colonialism in Ireland and India:  
A Comparison Between Brian Friel's Translations and  
Contemporary Anglophone Indian Literature*

*O colonialismo linguístico britânico na Irlanda e na Índia:  
Uma comparação entre Translations de Brian Friel e a  
literatura contemporânea anglófona indiana*

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**Abstract:** *Ireland and India have a long-standing cultural heritage and also share similarities in certain colonial traits. This paper aims at analysing the phenomenon of linguistic colonialism – in this case the imposition of the English language – and its features by drawing a literary parallel between Ireland and India. Through the comparison of excerpts from Brian Friel's Translations and passages from contemporary Anglophone Indian literature, this paper will investigate the similarities and differences between the experiences of these two former British colonies. While Friel's play is set in nineteenth-century Donegal, some of the examples of contemporary Anglophone Indian literature that are provided stretch backwards to reach the nineteenth century, while others engage with contemporary times and the legacy of linguistic colonialism. The features of linguistic colonialism that I will examine are dealt with in three sections that focus on mapping and translation, the treatment of toponyms and names, and the relationship between school and language.*

**Keywords:** *Ireland; India; Linguistic colonialism; Brian Friel; Anglophone Indian literature.*

**Resumo:** *Irlanda e Índia possuem uma herança cultural de longa data e também compartilham semelhanças em certos traços coloniais. Este artigo visa a analisar o fenômeno do colonialismo linguístico – neste caso, a imposição da língua inglesa – e suas características, traçando um paralelo literário entre a Irlanda e a Índia. Através da comparação de trechos de Translations de Brian Friel e passagens da literatura indiana anglófona contemporânea, este trabalho investigará as semelhanças e diferenças entre as experiências destas duas antigas*

*colônias britânicas. Enquanto a peça de Friel é ambientada em Donegal do século XIX, alguns dos exemplos da literatura indiana anglófona contemporânea que são fornecidos se estendem para trás para alcançar o século XIX, enquanto outros se envolvem com os tempos contemporâneos e o legado do colonialismo linguístico. As características do colonialismo linguístico que vou examinar são tratadas em três seções que se concentram no mapeamento e na tradução, no tratamento de topônimos e nomes, e na relação entre escola e língua.*

**Palavras-chave:** Irlanda; Índia; Colonialismo linguístico; Brian Friel; Literatura indiana anglófona.

## Introduction

“The poetry is altogether immature,’ [...]. ‘Confused and meaningless, as attempts by Africans to write evocatively in English usually are. Even to attempt to write in this way indicates an overweening temperament, an unrealistic estimate of your abilities.’”  
(the teacher on young Rashid’s poems written in English, Gurnah, *Desertion* 147)

The aim of this paper is to bring into focus linguistic colonialism in Ireland and India from a literary perspective, by drawing a parallel between Brian Friel’s *Translations*, set in nineteenth-century Ireland, and some examples of contemporary Anglophone Indian literature. As a matter of fact, India and Ireland have much more in common than similar colours in their national flags. They are endowed with a rich cultural heritage, a long history, varied traditions and also had nationalist movements whose comparisons were long taken for granted (“The Elephant” 11). Unfortunately, both countries were also subjected to British colonialism, whose grip lasted for a long time. As the Irish nationalist movement and its struggles for independence intensified, the British occupation became more violent and its effects were so far-reaching as to stretch until and beyond 1968. According to Ken Loach, the Troubles are “the end of a colonial struggle” (Loach). In order to denounce British colonial behaviour in Ireland, the film-maker made a film entitled *The Wind That Shakes the Barley* (Loach), to which I will circle back later. In a similar vein, in India, the foundation of the British Raj in 1858 was preceded by the long domination of the East India Company. The “Jewel in the Crown” obtained Independence in 1947, which was followed by the Partition of the country.

Colonialism and linguistic colonialism are tightly linked and both result in immediate and long-lasting deleterious effects on the colonised people. During colonial regimes, language is used as an active weapon. As a matter of fact, the colonisers’ language

is imposed on the population, as the Nigerian writer Chigozie Obioma reports in his novel *An Orchestra of Minorities*, set in the 2000s: “in their school days . . . it was a punishable offence to speak an ‘African language’” (Obioma 139). In a similar vein, the English language was imposed in Ireland and India, with some differences, though. In the subcontinent, knowledge of the English language was essential for those Indians who wished to acquire higher jobs and positions (Merani) and English became the language of instruction in 1835. Oftentimes, speaking English was seen as an element of prestige which gave lustre to the speakers. In *Sea of Poppies*, a novel set in nineteenth-century India, Amitav Ghosh portrays two characters of Indian origins who have learnt English. One of them is a raja and zamindar (namely a holder of land), whose father made “sure that he had a thorough schooling in English” (*Sea of Poppies* 86); whereas the other character is a gomusta (an Indian clerk) who “preferred to be spoken to in English, and liked to be addressed by the *anglice* of his name” [italics in the original] (*Sea of Poppies* 129-130). This propensity for learning English as a means of success indicates the profound entrenchment of the colonial system and the willingness of some colonised people to adjust linguistically out of necessity, as Maire proposes to do in *Translations* by Brian Friel: “We should all be learning to speak English” (*Translations* 436, act I). The Indian writer Arundhati Roy underlines that India has approximately 780 languages and that “Writing or speaking in English is not a tribute to the British Empire . . . ; it is a practical solution to the circumstances created by it” (“In What Language” 10). Linguistic imposition left its mark in Ireland as well. During the Troubles, the Irish could not speak Gaelic. In the opening scene of the film *The Wind That Shakes the Barley*, a young boy is killed by British policemen because he has dared to answer their questions in Gaelic. The prohibition for the native Irish to address the English in Irish dated back to 1367 with The Statute of Kilkenny, which was followed by further legislation in 1541 that banned the use of Irish language in the areas of Ireland under British rule at the time (Ó Ruairc).

Research on the relationship between India and Ireland has focused on numerous topics, including their imperial affinities between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and forms of patriotic resistance before 1882 (Bayly 379), and their diplomatic relationships also with respect to the Commonwealth in the post-independence period (“Ireland and India” 145). Building on the body of research concerned with parallels between Ireland and India, this paper will mainly adopt a literary standpoint by scrutinising passages from Friel’s *Translations* and contemporary Anglophone Indian novels that shed light on similarities and differences in the experience of linguistic colonialism in both countries.

## I. Map-Making and Translating

If read through a postcolonial lens, maps can become tantamount to tight, monolithic labels which stultify a burgeoning variety underneath. Indeed, one may be hard-pressed to find a more concise way to visually summarise colonialism than a map. Discussing how the idea for *Translations* came into being and the influence of *A Paper Landscape*, Brian Friel himself stated: “an aspect of colonialism; the death of the Irish language and the acquisition of English. [...] Here was the perfect metaphor to accommodate and realise all those shadowy notions – map-making” (Friel et al. 123). Aware of the impact of maps, Joseph Conrad verbally and effectively evoked the meaningful image of a map of Africa hanging in a waiting room in the offices of the Belgian company in *Heart of Darkness*:

on one end a large shining map, marked with all the colours of a rainbow. There was a vast amount of red – good to see at any time, because one knows that some real work is done in there, a deuce of a lot of blue, a little green, smears of orange, and, on the East Coast, a purple patch. (Conrad 11)

Especially if done by the coloniser, the act of map-making can be considered an act of violence which extends to the subjected people – and, also from an ecocritical perspective, maps can give information about ecological and topographic transformation carried out by humans (*The Nutmeg's* 52). Interestingly, in *Translations* the two British officials reach the Irish village of Baile Beag precisely with the aim of making a new map, which they present as extremely advantageous for the locals in terms of taxation. Added to this, they also have the task of translating Irish place-names into suitable anglicised versions, which points to a palimpsestic process of map-making whereby original toponyms are changed but, nonetheless, keep resurfacing in the play and being remembered at each staging or printing of *Translations* (Martanovschi 76-77). While map-making becomes a central theme in Friel's play, maps (more or less) incidentally feature in a surprising number of postcolonial texts, which signals their importance. In the African contemporary literary panorama, some examples can be Obioma's aforementioned *An Orchestra of Minorities* and especially Abdulrazak Gurnah's *By the Sea*: “New maps were made, complete maps, so that every inch was accounted for, and everyone now knew who they were, or at least who they belonged to” (*By the Sea* 15). In the Indian literary scenario under my analysis, Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* is masterly in its depiction of the red British imperial possessions, which may even be associated with a huge bloodstain: “[the raja] recalled the map that

hung in his daftar [office], and the red stain of Empire that had spread so quickly across it” (*Sea of Poppies* 169).

One of the reasons for the recurring presence of maps in postcolonial texts and works that deal with colonialism may lie in the fact that the act of map-making reduces the colonised land to its minimal constituents, thereby stultifying the variety of places and annihilating the complexity of their landmarks. All the characteristics of the land are painstakingly registered, overshadowed by the potency of colonial conquest and recast in the light of mere possessions. The presence of rivers, mountain ridges and cities is merely conducive to riches and their meaning is reframed in that lucrative, one-sided perspective, as the widespread introduction of monocultures in India and other colonies proves. Yet, postcolonial literature has put forward other forms of mapping done by the locals, which sheds light on the difference between the colonisers’ and the locals’ view of the same land. In *The Shadow Lines*, Ghosh offers an example of such mapping; Th’amma, a retired headmistress, insisted on the importance of a mandatory activity for the girls of her school:

every girl who opted for home science ought to be taught how to cook at least one dish that was a speciality of some part of the country other than her own. It would be a good way, she thought, of teaching them about the diversity and vastness of the country. (*The Shadow Lines* 142)

From this excerpt, the culinary patrimony of the Indian regions is brought into focus and extolled, as its meanings expand to indicate cultural heritage and variety: “Ranjana’s doing Kerala, so avyal is what you’ll get. . . . That’s Sunayana, she’s our Tamil for this term, wait till you taste her uppama, you’ll want to be Tamil yourself” (*The Shadow Lines* 142).

The Irish territory exudes the same variety and richness in terms of local folklore and curious stories related to place-names. Even in this case, by remembering the stories associated to each place, the locals mentally visualise a map that stems from their emotions and collective memory. This could be considered an example of “mapping by words,” a term used by Huhndorf in reference to new indigenous cartographies (Huhndorf 48). Indeed, Owen relates the story of the toponym Tobair Vree, whose origin stems from the death of a local man who drowned in a well in the desperate attempt to cure a physical imperfection:

OWEN So the question I put to you, Lieutenant, is this: what do we do with a name like that? Do we scrap Tobair Vree altogether and call it – what? – The Cross? Crossroads? Or do we keep piety with a man

long dead, long forgotten, his name ‘eroded’ beyond recognition, whose trivial little story nobody in the parish remembers?

YOLLAND Except you.

...

You remember it. (*Translations* 460, act II, scene one)

In *The Nutmeg’s Curse*, Amitav Ghosh discusses the colonisation of the Americas and underlines that “Renaming was one of the principal instruments with which colonists *erased* the prior meanings of conquered landscapes” [emphasis mine] (*The Nutmeg’s Curse* 49). In *Translations* too, the passage about Tobair Vree shows that place-names are not immortal, but that “It is the *process*, not the *existence*, of change that is at issue” [italics in the original] (Holstein 4).

This leads us to the topic of translation, which gives the title to Friel’s play. In the postcolonial discourse, translation is imbued with both positive and negative meanings. Worthen points out that the translation of Western classics has been a means of political critique also in theatres springing from colonial domination, insomuch as it corresponds to an act of appropriation (Worthen 135). As Filipova contends, colonisation has often been connected to translation, since it used it as an instrument (Filipova 147). Aware of this, in *The Hungry Tide* Amitav Ghosh offers an example of a translator who respects the “singularity of otherness” of an ancient song by writing a translation that is, by his own admission, not an exact copy of the original which it can never possess in its entirety (Filipova 147), therefore: “For once, I shall be glad if my imperfections render me visible” (*The Hungry Tide* 354). This act of sensitive translation allows the song to keep its uniqueness and alterity, and pays attention to that which cannot be translated (Filipova 147). On the other hand, the translation and transliteration of Irish place-names is not as attentive and smooth, as Yolland himself acknowledges: “There’s no English equivalent for a sound like that” (*Translations* 449, act II, scene one). In a way akin to Latin and Greek, Irish becomes fit to describe solely what used to be, rather than what is (Pelletier 68). Although translation implies a certain degree of alteration, in Friel’s play this linguistic process takes on the hues of “an eviction of sorts” (*Translations* 459, act II, scene one). Rather than slightly altered, the names on the map end up being utterly changed; Bun na hAbhann becomes ‘Burnfoot’ by means of imperfect sonic similarity, not even translation. In this regard, Yolland has the impression that “Something is being eroded” (*Translations* 459, act II, scene one).

## II. Place-names and People's Names

OWEN Lios na Muc, the Fort of the Pigs, has become Swinefort [...]. And the new school isn't at Poll na gCaorach – it's at Sheepsrock. Will you be able to find your way? (*Translations* 458, act II, scene one)

As O'Grady points out in reference to Seamus Heaney's poems, "naming is also claiming" (O'Grady) and this is particularly evident in Irish history. Still nowadays, a populous city in Ulster is officially known as Londonderry; however, it is also called Derry ("Londonderry"). Often, place-names become the ground of linguistic imposition. Set in Donegal in 1833 and using Irish English as "the principal spoken language, the language of performance" (Worthen 146), Friel's *Translations* attacks a process of anglicisation:

MANUS What's 'incorrect' about the place-names we have here?

OWEN Nothing at all. They're just going to be standardized.

MANUS You mean changed into English?

OWEN Where there's ambiguity, they'll be anglicized. (*Translations* 446, act I)

In a similar vein, the names of Indian cities were altered by the British, an issue which Anglophone Indian literature is not reluctant to address. In *The Hungry Tide*, one of the main characters is made aware of the import of the words he chooses to refer to a city: "I should be more careful, but the re-naming was so recent that I do get confused sometimes. I try to reserve "Calcutta" for the past and "Kolkata" for the present but occasionally I slip. Especially when I'm speaking English" (*The Hungry Tide* 12). If naming is really tantamount to claiming, the character's attention to language is not merely a nit-picky or pedantic behaviour which springs from his profession as translator, but is rather imbued with profound political meaning. The British anglicised the city of Kolkata and transformed it into Calcutta; yet, the Indians decided to re-adopt the original name in 2001 (Roy). A similar fate befell Mumbai, which became Bombay, and nowadays both versions are used by locals in casual conversation (Taylor). Aside from the names of cities, numerous streets and squares were named after English viceroys and governor-generals, which were then renamed (Roy).

Precisely like the names of cities, titles such as that of national capital are laden with implications and importance; as such, they should be handled with care. Suddenly, in 1911, the British moved the Indian capital from Calcutta to Delhi. Locals were voiceless and were not consulted on the issue, although the change of capital brought about noticeable changes for the two cities and their lives. This event is tackled by the poet and

writer Janice Pariat in one of her novels, partly written from the perspective of an English girl who reaches India at the beginning of the twentieth century:

Evie hears often that it is a tremendous loss, of power and prestige [...]. More than a few officers are now considering a transfer. If the center of power shifts, so will they. Except that Delhi is yet ill-equipped to accommodate the British. They have heard it will take twenty years or more to complete laying out a “New Delhi” [...]. “What might the Indians think?” Evie would like to ask, even though she suspects this is not what anyone else considers an important question. (Pariat 128-129)

I am of the opinion that there is a sound reason why Lieutenant Yolland and Maire, an Irish girl, manage to understand each other without words and fill the linguistic chasm that has opened between them by – oddly – listing Irish place-names. By calling the place-names out loud in their correct Gaelic pronunciation, it is as if the British Lieutenant were acknowledging their uniqueness, beauty and dignity, thus legitimating their right to exist and be known under the names that were attached to them by their people. As Chigozie Obioma writes in *An Orchestra of Minorities*: “*That everything we say, everything, lives. I just am sure*” [italics in the original] (Obioma 276). By extension, the listing of Irish place-names might be seen as a praise of Maire’s beauty as well and, therefore, a declaration of love (Martanovschi 82). Defined as a language that does not exist but that is more than real (Randaccio 118), the list of Irish place-names becomes a viable means of communication due to its deep implications.

Since I have highlighted that names have profound meanings, a final reflection ought to be made on people’s names and their treatment by colonisers. In *Sea of Poppies*, two Indian characters’ names are poked fun at and transformed into insults: it is the case of the previously-mentioned raja (a king or princely ruler) and gomusta (an Indian clerk). Raja Neel Rattan Halder and Baboo Nob Kissin Pander respectively turn into “Raja Nil-Rotten” and “Baboon” (*Sea of Tide* 105, 208). It should be specified that Irish names were not altered to such an extent. Nonetheless, it may happen that they were anglicised. Seamus Heaney recalled that when he was taking his first steps as a poet, one of his early poems was published in *The Irish Times* under the name “James Heaney” (Heaney), James being the English version for Seamus. Interestingly, in *Translations*, the name of one of the main characters is replaced by another that has no relationship with his own. As a matter of fact, “Roland” is the name with which both Captain Lancey and Yolland address Owen. To reiterate, place-names and names generally are not meaningless labels but are

invested with identifying cultural and political connotations. As Holstein highlights, we “almost viscerally” recognise the power of naming, which is an entitlement to identify ourselves and designate what we think belongs to us (Holstein 1). Addressing Owen with a wrong name, albeit by misunderstanding, and naming the Irish toponyms with different anglicised names means denying his identity as an individual and traumatically wiping away the places’ long history. In the end, tired of being “mis-called,” Owen reacts and from his words we may even think that it is Ireland itself that is shouting at Britain through the Irish man’s voice:

OWEN (*Explodes*) George! For God’s sake! *My name is not Roland!*  
YOLLAND What?  
OWNE (*Softly*) My name is Owen. (*Pause*) [*italics in the original*] (*Translations* 461, act II, scene one)

The tight link between Owen’s name and place-names is further strengthened by a following passage, in which Yolland and Owen playfully try to decide which variation of his name to choose (Rowen or Oland) as they had previously done with the toponyms (Holstein 3). It seems particularly appropriate to end this section on names with Owen’s and Ireland’s desperate cries and requests of acknowledgement that are mingled in the above-quoted excerpt and heightened by their very simultaneity.

### III. Schooling and Language

HUGH[My book] is entitled: ‘The Pentaglot Preceptor or Elementary Institute of the English, Greek, Hebrew, Latin and Irish Languages; Particularly Calculated for the Instruction of Such Ladies and Gentlemen as may Wish to Learn without the Help of a Master. (*Translations* 458, act II, scene one)

Given that up to this point my analysis has focused on linguistic issues such as mapping, translations, toponyms and names, it seems important to conclude by shedding light on one institution that particularly promotes language and can shape people’s minds, namely school. The above-quoted passage may surprise for the length of the title of Hugh’s book; nevertheless, the most striking word is certainly the last one: Master. Indeed, Hugh’s book will allow men and women to study languages on their own, without a Master, whose spectral presence hovers over another kind of education system; that is, the new national school that the British are planning to build. When reflecting on colonialism and teaching, it is almost impossible not to recall some famous lines from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*:

CALIBAN You taught me language; and my  
profit on't  
Is, I know how to curse. The red  
plague rid you  
For learning me your language! (Shakespeare, act I, scene two)

Shakespeare's play has been considered a key text for the application of postcolonial analysis (Quayson) and it throws paramount insights into the relationship between teaching and colonisation. Deprived of the control of his island, Caliban is taught to speak the coloniser's language by Miranda. As a result, he is forced to "translate" his thoughts into a language that is not his own. The fear of the influence that the English language will wield over people's minds is also reflected by Bridget's words: "You'll be taught to speak English and every subject will be taught through English and everyone'll end up as cute as the Buncrana people" (*Translations* 432, act I).

In India, the knowledge of English was fundamental for anyone who wished to have access to higher positions (Merani) and it was also introduced in schools, which paved the way for its "eminent role – both detrimental and favourable" in India (Bedi 9). In her *English Language in India*, Bedi examines the introduction of English in the subcontinent and the British figures who played an important role in the process. Aimed at creating "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" to use as interpreters (Macaulay) and aimed at imparting western knowledge, the English Education Act of 1835 introduced English as the language of instruction, which created knowledge that was limited to the upper and middle classes of urban society, though (Bedi 22). Thus, the English language became a means of empowerment which created a social chasm. In *Sea of Poppies*, one of the reasons why Baboo Nob Kissin's employers appreciate him is "his fluency in English" (*Sea of Poppies* 160). Retaining its empowering role even today, the English language figures in a telling passage from a novel by Aravind Adiga which is set in contemporary times. Ibrahim, a man from a respectable neighbourhood, is so familiar with the English language that he is able to make jokes with it, as evidenced by the fact that he alters a sign reading "Work in Progress Inconvenience is Regretted BMC" into "Inconvenience in Progress Work is Regretted BMC" (Adiga 33). After a while, Mrs Puri, one of Ibrahim's neighbours, passes by and spots the altered sign. She then questions Ram Khare, the guard of their building:

'Who did *that* to the municipal sign?' 'Mr Ibrahim Kudwa, [...] He asked me what I thought of the joke and I said, I can't read English, sir. Is it a good joke?'

‘We are impotent people in an impotent city, Ram Khare [...]. Jokes are the only weapon we have.’ [italics in the original] (Adiga 33)

While Ibrahim and his neighbour master the English language, the guard does not. In the same novel, other references to the importance of knowing English and its appreciation soon abound: Ajwani, a real-estate broker, gauges the linguistic ability of one of his customers and ponders that “Her English was better than his; he noted this with pleasure” (Adiga 71), while a cleaning lady observes that she is very likely to lose her job and never be able to be hired again because “they’ll have maids who wear uniforms and speak English. They won’t want me” (Adiga 187). Incidentally, it ought to be pointed out that the English-speaking Ajwani’s and Ibrahim’s professions deal with the field of services – real-estate and a cyber café, respectively – whereas Mrs Puri is the wife of an accountant, thus offering a literary confirmation of Bedi’s observation that English retains prestige due to its status as the language of communication with clients in the service sector and due to the fact that Indian economic growth is mainly service-driven (Bedi 34, 35).

As Yolland strikingly points out, “Just before Doalty came up to me this morning I was thinking that at that moment I might have been in Bombay instead of Ballybeg” (*Translations* 454, act II, scene one) – which directly establishes a relationship between Ireland and India. Yolland’s words can have a twofold meaning: they might mean, as Yolland then explains, that he was actually bound to sail for India, had he not missed the ship. However, they could also hint at a blurred distinction between the two places, which puts Ballybeg at the same level of Bombay, thereby further emphasising its status as a colony. Added to this, the introduction of Bombay offers the audience a shift of perspective in order to evaluate their potential reactions in a different context: perhaps, if Yolland really were in India, they would deem the translation and alteration of Indian toponyms as necessary, albeit regrettable (Holstein 5).

That the Irish are treated as colonial subjects is made even clearer by Lancey’s behaviour towards them. When it comes to explaining to the locals why he and Yolland are there, the Captain talks in a very strange way, as if the Irish were children or impaired in their mental faculties: “You may have seen me – seen me – working in this section – section? – working. We are here – here – in this place – you understand? – to make a map – a map – a map and –” (*Translations* 443, act I). Were the impression of speaking to children not exhaustively conveyed by the Captain’s exaggerated prosody, Friel himself clears every doubt by adding the indication “*He speaks as if he were addressing children*” [italics in the original] (Friel 443, act I). Provided that one bears in mind that there are noticeable

differences between the two contexts, Frantz Fanon's words in *Black Skin, White Masks* might be applied to this situation as well, in that there is no denying Lancey's obnoxious feelings of superiority in his affected prosody: "A white man talking to a person of color behaves exactly like a grown-up with a kid" (Fanon 14).

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to show similarities and differences between linguistic colonialism and its features in Ireland and India, by analysing excerpts from *Translations* by Brian Friel and other examples from contemporary Anglophone Indian literature. Although every process of colonisation is different, comparing forms of colonialism can highlight certain widespread processes, behaviours and frames of reference which, if duly recognised, might be avoided in the future. While interviewing Seamus Heaney, Paul Muldoon recognised that the American model in civil rights was very "instructive" (Muldoon) for the Irish. I would like to conclude this paper by showing that, in turn, the history of Ireland and the Irish people was important for the Indians. Amitav Ghosh's words bring together the U.S., the Indians and the Irish:

I've really become completely fascinated by the part that Indian émigrés in the U.S. played at the turn of the century in generating a certain anti-imperialism and certain ways of resisting colonialism. Often their mentors in this were the Irish. ("An Interview" 88)

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