

# After the apocalypse: the poetics of Irish language preservation

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**Abstract.** This article examines a number of Irish-language tropes operating in three literary texts: Brian Friel's play *Translations*, first performed in 1980; Nuala Ní Dhomnaill's poetry collection, *Northern Lights* (2018); and the poet Doireann Ní Gríofa's bilingual *Lies* (2018). The title of this article derives from the association between these tropes of linguistic loss, and apocalyptic imagery – an association bolstered by an on-going debate on the viability of the language in contemporary Ireland.

**Keywords** — multilingualism, pedagogy, Irish language, stutter, lies, linguistic loss, translation, minority language, Brian Friel, Nuala Ní Dhomnaill, Doireann Ní Gríofa.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Doireann Ní Gríofa's poem "A Jaw, Ajar" (2016) is set in a classroom, and features a lesson on a human jaw bone, an artefact of famine-era Ireland. The poem is written predominantly in English, but the Irish language makes two brief appearances: in an epigraph, which offers a series of definitions for the phrase "cur i gcéill" – variously translated as "hypocrisy", "bluff", "disguise" and "sham"; and again, toward the end of the poem, when a nameless professor asks the narrator for a translation of the term "jaw bone", technically known as a "mandible" [17]:

*What would you call that in Gaelic?*  
You stare at him, bones in hand, your jaw ajar.  
Suppose you stutter, your mouth fails. You try  
to say corrán géill, but the only sound from  
your mouth is cur i gcéill [17].

The euphonic connection between the Irish phrase for mandible ("corrán géill") and deceit ("cur i gcéill") alerts the reader to a series of suspect narratives weaving throughout the piece. Whilst the classroom setting implies that the professor's query forms part of a call-and-response pedagogical technique, his use of the archaic term "Gaelic" instead of "Irish" signals his own lack of familiarity with the language. Ní Gríofa's epigraphic "bluff" seems to implicitly gloss this pedagogical exchange. The comparison between the long-dead owner of a jaw bone which "date[s] to a time and a region/where only Irish was spoken" [17], and a modern pedagogue who seeks to augment his lesson with a smattering of Irish is illustrative of a sense of linguistic loss running throughout the poem. The narrator's stutter, as she struggles for a response, underscores this loss, her own "jaw ajar" mirroring the exposed bones that she holds in her

hands. To the backdrop of a dry recitation of academic facts about a past tragedy ("remains – derelict workhouse – Famine-era – a mass grave" [17]), the narrator re-imagines the victim, replete with "a mouth/that only ever knew the spit and speech of one/warm, wet tongue" [17]. The dual meaning of "tongue" – as both literal organ and figurative language – aids in this revival, and the hinged jaw bone offers a striking medium for a creative act of ventriloquism: "Suppose you hold this split/jaw bone to your ear and imagine you hear/all he spoke, every sound from his throat" [17]. The split in the jaw bone, further emphasised by the demarcated lines of text, is continued in Ní Gríofa's accompanying illustrations of jaw bones, which are each in turn bisected by blocks of colour; a visual reminder of the thematic division between the two languages in the text.

Ní Gríofa's poem offers a useful entry point into a discussion of multilingualism in Ireland, and more particularly, into how the minority Irish language is contextualised within a majority English-language literary milieu. The Great Famine of the 1840s, which disproportionately affected vernacular speakers of the Irish language, is one in a series of events that is often evoked to chart the decline of Irish as a spoken tongue on the island. As I discuss in this article, "A Jaw, Ajar" is illustrative of a series of literary tropes associated with this gradual marginalisation. Firstly, the sparse couple of words (or "cúpla focail") of Irish in the poem can be seen as a remnant or palimpsest of what once was, and these macaronic (words from one language introduced into the context of another) insertions are often illustrative of both linguistic loss, and the subversive potential of Irish to disrupt meaning in the dominant language. Secondly, the figure of the professor can be seen as a potential symbol of the failure of pedagogical practices to replenish the language or arrest its decline; and lastly, the arrested tongue – or "stutter" – of the sole fluent speaker, who is marooned into voicelessness and silence, is suggestive of the isolation experienced by present-day speakers and writers of the language. These tropes vary, however, in application in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Irish literature. In order to illustrate this, this article explores the work of three writers from Ireland, from different sides of the linguistic "split": Brian Friel, a playwright who wrote predominantly in English, and whose play *Translations* (1980) [8] is a foundational text in post-colonial interrogations of translation theory; Nuala Ní Dhomnaill, who writes poetry exclusively in Irish, but has published a number of bilingual texts with translations of her poems by

fellow poets (most recently *Northern Lights* (2018) [15]); and lastly, Ní Gríofa herself, who has published poetry in the Irish language, in English, and bilingually; her latest collection, *Lies* (2018) [19], is a self-translated selection of her previously published Irish-language poetry. Ní Gríofa's title – *Lies* – points toward an expansion on her theme of lying, in all of its variations as defined in her epigraph to “A Jaw, Ajar”, a theme that may also usefully be applied in a discussion of the broader responses of Irish-language literature to the English. The title of this article derives from an observed association between these literary tropes of linguistic loss, and apocalyptic imagery (often, but not exclusively, linked to the events of the Great Famine) – an association bolstered by an on-going debate on the viability of the language in modern Ireland. “The question of whether the language is dead or alive”, as Barry McCrea writes, “is, and has long been, central to discourse about the language” [10, p. 31].

## II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE IRISH LANGUAGE IN TRANSLATION

In January 1995, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill published an essay on the Irish language in the *New York Times*, entitled “Why I choose to write in Irish, the corpse that sits up and talks back” [16], in which she explores the contradictory position of writing and communicating in a language ostensibly deemed “dead” for literary purposes. “So what does that make me”, she asks “A walking ghost? A linguistic spectre?” [16, p. 14]. She acknowledges the advantages of writing in English from a commercial perspective, and the attendant audience it would bring, but nevertheless feels compelled to service a larger, if ineffable, idea of communication instead: “the language that my soul speaks, and the place it comes from, is Irish” [16, p. 13]. Ní Dhomhnaill's resistance to writing poetry in English extends to a refusal to translate her own poetry from Irish, and her first bilingual collection, *Pharaoh's Daughter* (1990) features translations instead from a number of poets working in Ireland at this time. Toward the end of her essay she cites one of the poems from this collection, “Ceist na Teangan” (“The Language Question”), translated by Paul Muldoon, which offers an analogy between language and the tenuous hope of Moses's mother, as she consigns her son to the waters of the Nile in a hastily constructed lifeboat:

Cuirim mo dhóchas ar snámh (I place my hope on the water  
i mbáidín teangan (in this little boat/of the language)  
faoi mar a leagfá naionán (the way a body might put/an  
infant) [16, p. 23]

The biblical story of a mother's attempt to protect her child from the purge of first-born sons by a prophecy-fearing emperor – a purge which then prompts the seven plagues of Egypt – offers an apocalyptic metaphor for linguistic loss. Ní Dhomhnaill argues that the preservation of minority languages such as Irish, “with their unique and unrepeatable way of looking at the world”, should “be as important for human beings as the preservation of the remaining tropical rain forests is for biological diversity” [16, pp. 20-21], and she reinforces the analogy between language and climate by citing an old Irish song, “Cill Cais”, that laments both the

razing of the forests of Ireland (“Cad a dhéanfaimid feasta gan adhmaid?”/“What will we do now without wood?”), and the decline of the “Gaelic order” (“Níl trácht ar Chill Cais ná a theaghlach”/“Cill Cais or its household are not mentioned”) [16, pp. 21-22]. She is caustic about what she considers to be the piecemeal adaption of Irish in service to a broader English-language literary field, suggesting that writers in this dominant language anticipate its departure by fetishising its absence: “[T]he sooner the language lies down and dies, the better, so they can cannibalize it with greater equanimity, peddling their ‘ethnic chic’ with nice little translations ‘from the Irish’” [16, p. 14].

“Translations ‘from the Irish’”, as Ní Dhomhnaill argues in her essay, are weighted with the ideological tension born of the Irish language's minority status in Ireland, but the translation process, particularly as it applies to Irish-language poetry, has creative as well as destructive potential. Gregory A. Schirmer, writing of *Pharaoh's Daughter* in particular, observes that the translating-poets “have in fact transformed one body of poetry into another body of poetry, one tied to the original but not too closely, dependent on it to some extent but also sufficiently independent of it to enable an extraordinary level of creative expression” [23, p. xxxiv]. The poet Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin similarly emphasises the role of creative expression in her own translation work from Irish to English, writing, “[a] translation that is not a rewriting will always bear the scars of our struggle with the original” [12, p. 201], and Seamus Heaney, who wrote of his own struggle while translating the middle-Irish text *Buile Suibhne* into English, has equally underscored the aesthetic elements of the process, noting that, “unless the translator experiences the almost muscular sensation that rewards successful original composition, it is unlikely that the results of the text-labour will have a life of its own” [9, p. 65]. Gearóid Mac Lochlainn, a bilingual poet, emphasizes the distinction between his poems in Irish, and his own English-language translations:

“My translations are an attempt to minimise the loss of music and euphony that occurs with “straight” translation. I also wanted the translations to have an organic internal dynamic of their own inspired by the originals but not independent of them. They are also a playful jibe thrown out at the monoglot who seeks truth in translation. Translation is a chasm of echoes and reverb, a circus tent full of funny mirrors and fascinating dupery” [11, p. 190].

Mac Lochlainn's definition emphasises a subjective adherence to internal form, much as Ní Chuilleanáin and Heaney advocated, but appears to imply also that this creative-translation exposes the lie of a literal, or “straight” translation. Truth in translation is sought only, in his depiction, by the monoglot (presumably English-language speaker); Irish-language speakers and writers, on the other hand, are at least minimally bilingual, and more alert to the “dupery” inherent in multilingual exchange, as Ní Gríofa's poem infers. Ní Dhomhnaill, over the course of her long and successful career as a poet, has embraced the incursions made upon her poems by translators – often electing to read an English language version first, for the benefit of her audiences. She too has incorporated macaronic references to

other languages in her poetry, in addition to English, a practice from which Ní Gríofa herself may well have drawn inspiration [18]. The sentiments expressed in her “Corpse” essay, however, about the isolation experienced by the Irish-language speaker and writer, and further, the framework imposed upon the Irish language by English-language texts, using Irish as a metaphor for absence, death, and in its most extreme iteration – apocalypse – are illustrative. All three of the writers discussed here incorporate these frameworks in their texts, to depict differing conceptions of the Irish language in literature.

### III. RESEARCH MATERIALS AND RESULTS

*Friel’s Translations; Ní Gríofa’s Lies; and Ní Dhomhnaill’s Northern Lights.*

Six months after the publication of Ní Dhomhnaill’s “Corpse” essay, the playwright Brian Friel also had reason to reflect on the irony of an absent Irish language when Seán Ó Táirpaigh, the artistic director of an Irish-language theatre company based in Galway, contacted Friel for permission to perform a bilingual version of his play *Translations* (1980). Set in Co. Donegal in 1833, *Translations* is a meditation on a number of potentially apocalyptic occurrences – the erasure of the then-majority Irish language in the face of the rapidly encroaching English language, the elimination of Irish place-names in a vast colonial mapping endeavour, and, most urgently, the sickly-sweet miasma of potato blight – and therefore of potential famine – permeating the air. Though written in English, one of the play’s central conceits is that half of the characters are actually speaking in the Irish language (though we hear them in English), a split Ó Táirpaigh proposed to make literal, hoping “that by doing such a well-known modern classic in a bilingual production [it] will greatly increase our potential audience” [22]. Ó Táirpaigh, writing from one of the very few dedicated Irish-language speaking regions in Ireland, was no doubt aware that the potential audience for an Irish-language production of any play was vanishingly small. The 1996 census figures put those who claimed daily fluency in the language at only 2%, a significant proportion of which were concentrated in Galway and its rural surrounds, one of three dedicated Irish-language, or “Gaeltacht” regions in the country. Friel’s initial response to the request cautioned that such changes would essentially constitute a re-write of the play, undercutting a central theme (“[t]wo people speaking the same language and not understanding one another is the defining concept of the play”) [4] and when Ó Táirpaigh wrote back, taking Friel’s caution as qualified permission, Friel’s reply registers an unequivocal rejection of the bilingual premise:

“To be more forthright I think a bilingual production of *Translations* would do a deep injury to the text and in fact demolish the ironic base from which the play takes off. Had I wanted to write a bilingual play on this theme I would have written one. That is not a matter of interpretation” [5].

Notwithstanding Friel’s contention here that he could have written *Translations* in Irish had he wished, the vast majority of Friel’s literary output was in English.

Translation or “interpretation” between speakers and writers of the *same* language, however, was a key theme for Friel. For instance, around the same time as he was writing *Translations*, he was “translating” a number of Russian plays for the Irish stage. As he freely admitted in an interview with Paddy Agnew in 1980, he did not speak a word of Russian; his version of Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* (1901) was developed with the aid of a number of standard English translations, but in so doing, he was attempting to move away from those texts, which were “redolent of either Edwardian England or the Bloomsbury set” [3, p. 84] and toward a text that approximated an Irish voice. Friel felt that the “rhythms of these versions [did] not match with the rhythms of our own speech patterns”, something he felt “that they ought to, in some way” [3, p. 84]. In another interview that same year, he acknowledged a debt to J. M. Synge’s dual position as chief playwright of the Irish Revival and as an architect of a euphonically inspired translation technique. He stated that “[t]here was no such thing as an indigenous Irish drama until 1904. Before that, dramatists from Ireland always had to write for the English stage: to pitch their voices in an English way” [3, p. 81]. In his archival notes on the construction of *Translations*, the word “pitch” appears again, in an aside on the school head-master Hugh, one of the central protagonists of the play, with Friel noting that should Hugh elect to begin instructing his students in English, a “new literature” will necessarily emerge: “Somewhere”, Friel glosses, “lurks the issue of the post-1900 Irish dramatist pitching his voice; and because of the distortion that demands, there is a concomitant change in attitude, in thoughts thought, in ideas explored” [6]. “Rhythm”, “pitch”, and most frequently “voice”, are often markers of Friel’s attempts to translate between modes of English, in order to build on a uniquely Irish dramatic tradition.

Friel’s translation theory is underpinned by readings of George Steiner’s seminal linguistic text, *After Babel* (1975), and citations from *Babel* populate his notes on *Translations*. The “new literature” that Friel spoke of, emerging from the acquisition of another language, appears bolstered by Steiner’s reading, which asserts that “different tongues give to the mechanism of ‘alterity’ a dynamic, transferable enactment. [...] To a greater or lesser degree every language offers its own reading of life” [7]. Friel was drawn also to Steiner’s emphasis on the lexical ambiguity of language, and its capacity for deceit. As Steiner observed, and as Friel heavily underlined in his notes, “ambiguity, polysemy, opaqueness, the violation of grammatical and logical sequences, reciprocal incomprehensions, the capacity to lie – these are not the pathologies of language but the roots of its genius” [7].

In Friel’s *Translations*, Hugh, the loquacious and often inebriated Master of the local hedge-school in the fictional town of Ballybeg, is the character in the play most influenced by Steiner’s conception of language, and most prone to commentary on the theoretical implications of the clash between the then-majority Irish-language and the encroaching English. Hugh’s pedagogical technique is also call-and-response, but his erudition is undercut by gaps in

his delivery, violating logical sequences. “He always promises three points”, as his son Owen explains to the British officer Yolland, who is there to map the countryside, but “he never gets beyond A and B” [8, p.52]. These failures of transmission echo throughout the play. One of the students of the hedge school, Sarah, has a stutter so severe that it reduces her to silence, and Manus, Hugh’s eldest son and his assistant at the school, takes great pains to improve Sarah’s speech, exhorting her in the opening scene of the play to speak her name: “Get your tongue and your lips working. ‘My name –’ Come on. One more try. ‘My name is –’ Good girl” [8, p. 2]. After a series of attempts, stumbling over a combination of those words, she eventually produces a complete sentence: “My name is Sarah” [8, p. 3]. Though Sarah is ostensibly one of the Irish-language speakers in the play, her debilitating stutter as she attempts to say her name foreshadows the more isolated experience of the future Irish-language speaker.

The Irish language appears literally only fleetingly in the text, for the most part in the Irish place-names that are subject to the translation efforts of the British mapping expedition, but these macaronic insertions, much like Ní Gríofa’s sparse terminology in “A Jaw, Ajar”, carry the capacity for multiple meaning. Repeated references to the public house Anna na mBreag, for instance, which Hugh translates as Anna of the Lies, are illustrative of a series of rhetorical re-framings occurring within the text, disrupting the more explicit narratives offered to the people of Ballybeg. Anna na mBreag is the source of poteen, the potato-based drink that keeps Hugh permanently inebriated and under whose influence Yolland, and Owen, who has been recruited for his Irish-language skills, perform some of their translation work on the place-names in the locale. Both Anna na mBreag and her chief product become part of a linguistic litany for Yolland whilst drunk on poteen – “Anna na mBreag! Baile Beag! Inis Meadhon! Bombay! Tobair Vree! Eden! And poteen – correct, Owen?” [8, p. 61] – which form a roll-call of the kinds of translation choices that have been made up until this point in the play. Baile Beag, for instance, which translates as “small town”, is rendered phonetically in the text as Ballybeg – a translation premised on the euphony or sound of the word, but one also which elides its original meaning. Poteen, and its chief ingredient, also serves as a reminder of the threat of potato blight under which the community constantly lives. Most explicitly, Anna na mBreag is the site of both the celebration of the birth of an infant, and the acknowledgment of his death a short while later, illustrating both the transience of life, and the profound lie of continuity. The litany of breaga (lies) throughout the text are macaronic insertions that serve as embedded symbols of the factors contributing to linguistic erasure.

Where Friel’s Ballybeg community exists on the cusp of apocalyptic events, Ní Gríofa’s subjects are often the artefacts of their aftermath, a motif she carries throughout her work to quite playful effect. In a review of an installation by the artist Ailbhe Ní Bhriain, for instance, which staged the remains of human civilisation after a devastating fictional flood, Ní Gríofa confesses that her own

reticence about confronting the potential for climactic calamity dissipated as she began to engage with the creative possibilities of a post-apocalyptic, post-human landscape: “This is what will happen, I think to myself, we will disappear, and the world will simply continue in our absence” [20]. In a series of references to climactic agents of destruction, it is water, and its various corollaries, that are re-visited most frequently in her bilingual collection, *Lies* (2018), which she connects, in part, with a more metaphorical linguistic “flow”. Ní Gríofa’s poetic bilingualism is, in her own words, hard won. Though monoglot Irish speakers don’t exist anymore, Ní Gríofa’s poetic voice, like Ní Dhomhnaill’s before her, emerged exclusively in Irish:

“When I first started to write, I was writing only in Irish and I had a strong sense of flow, I almost couldn’t help myself. Then, because I didn’t have any external translator, I forced myself to learn how to translate my own poems to English. At first, there was zero sense of flow in that process for me, it was excruciating trying to make myself write in another language, really counter-intuitive. But then I started to write some poems in English” [18, p. 64-65].

Her self-translation is motivated in part, she claims, by utilitarian reasons– she lacked an external translator – but her enforced poetic bilingualism has produced a rare single-authored anthology that highlights the interaction between both languages. The effect is democratic, with neither language dominant, and Ní Gríofa’s macaronic approach is augmented by the occasional inclusion of a third language. In the poem “Dos Conejos” (a title shared by both the Irish and the English version), the narrator is a backpacker who in the course of staying with Spanish-speaking hosts, accidentally causes the escape of one of two caged rabbits – the Dos Conejos of the title. Ashamed of her actions she later inquires “Go stadach”/“Stutter-tongued” [19, p. 14-15] of its whereabouts, hamstrung by her lack of Spanish. The introduction of a third language here, and the narrator’s discomfort with its usage, is illustrative more of the process by which language is acquired, rather than as a harbinger of its eventual loss. The interaction between the Irish and the English text underscores the themes of language acquisition, and the creative possibilities of linguistic exchange. The English version contains an additional phrase, not present in the Irish – “I wanted to say something like *Sorry*” [19, p. 15] – a difference that emphasises both the distinction between both poems, and also the ambiguity inherent in multilingual exchange: the narrator seeks a Spanish word that is “like” sorry, to apologise for her mistake, rather than a word that *is* sorry. These gaps in exchange open up a creative space in the text that permits new forms of communication. In “An Broiste Ruiseach”/“The Russian Brooch”, twin poems which feature an artefact examined for evidence of a past life, the river “Нева́” located in “Санкт-Петербург” remain untranslated in either Irish or English [19, p. 64-65]. Dedicated to the poet Eavan Boland, the Irish version of this poem has had a number of textual lives – in addition to appearing in *Lies* it was also included in *Calling Cards* (2018), an anthology of “Ten Younger Irish Poets”, for which Eiléan Ní Chuilleanáin composed the English

counter-part. Ní Chuilleanáin elects, in her interpretation, to translate the Russian text as “the icy banks/of the Neva in St Petersburg” [13, p. 17], a departure from Ní Gríofa’s own English version, but Ní Gríofa also makes subtle changes to her Irish version – the alliterative “greim nó ghluaiseach” (“food or safe passage”) of *Lies*, becomes “greim nó pasáiste” in the later *Calling Cards*, an illustration perhaps of the cross-pollination of her own English version (“passage”/“pasáiste”), but evidence also of Ní Gríofa’s fluid approach to her own poems. She admits, in conversation with poet Leontia Flynn, to a recent preference for communicating her poetry orally, rather than textually, “in the way that freeing them to an audience, rather than on page, they are mine still, and I can hold them and change them and say them however I want” [18, p. 66]. Ní Gríofa’s multilingualism appears rooted to the flexibility of the spoken word, rather than the fixity of text.

The “flow” associated with linguistic comfort, and the fluidity of speaking a poem rather than committing it to text, finds apt metaphor in the images of water that runs through *Lies*. The fictional flood that formed the basis of the Ní Bhriain exhibit, and the untranslated Russian river, find most frequent form as ice/oigher, the title of her previous Irish-language collection. In the poem “Aibreán, 1912”, and its English counterpart, “April, 1912”, the date of the *Titanic*’s fateful loss, the ice-berg with which it collides is anthropomorphised, and carries the red paint of its fateful encounter like a scar (“scréach i bpéint”/“a shriek in paint” [19, p. 48-49]) before changing form, and dissolving into the surrounding water, renewing and re-constituting itself. “Triptic: Obair Bhaile”, and its English counterpart, “Homework: A Triptych” compare a digital cache of photographs re-discovered during a domestic cleaning, with the discovery of photographs from the doomed Shackleton landing party expedition in the Antarctic. Ice and its iterations link the domestic with the historical here: the household “reoiteoir”/“freezer” beneath which the discovery is made; the family photos variously depicting “lá sneachta”/“a snowy day”; and a puppy, “a chosa reoite san aer”/“legs frozen in mid-air”, are all juxtaposed with the “bloc oighir”/“ice-block” that melted to expose the images of those who had perished during the abortive expedition [19, pp. 36-37]. Both “Aibreán” and “Triptic” employ pioneering ships, *Titanic* and *Aurora*, as historical anchors, a means of structuring and re-structuring a historical narrative premised on privileging human endeavour, illustrated by the structuring and re-structuring of the water on which they travel. By shifting the focus from these tragic ships, and their famously doomed occupants, to the detritus of their aftermath, it shifts also from man’s hubris to the durability of that environment. It is tempting also, if a little tenuous, to find echoed in the name *Aurora*, the *Aurora Borealis*, or “northern lights”, a gesture both to a polar location, one more addition to the roll-call of ice, and also to the continuity of a natural phenomenon in the face of human extinction. More broadly, the shift between ice and water in Ní Gríofa’s text, a shift contextualised as a natural and inevitable function of nature, offers a lens through which to view an equally natural, if metaphorical, interplay between the “frozen” tongue of a speaker who has yet to master a

new language, and the “flow” of fluency – with each frozen period containing the germs of renewal.

Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill takes the title of her most recent bilingual collection, *Northern Lights* (2018), from just this phenomenon, and the cover image features a Diarmuid Breen painting entitled *The Dilemma*, which portrays a wolf circling a demurely dressed and posed girl, offering an ironic juxtaposition between human civilisation and encroaching nature. This juxtaposition, enforced by a literal split down the centre of the image, is suggestive also, according to Clíona Ní Ríordáin, of the kind of encroachments made by English on the Irish language in the act of translation [21]; a visual “split” similarly enacted by Ní Gríofa in “A Jaw, Ajar”’s accompanying illustrations. The collection is partly a retrospective, featuring a selection of Ní Dhomhnaill’s previously published poems, and it concludes with ten recent compositions. As Ní Dhomhnaill explains in a recent interview, her title theme emerged in part from a trip to Firbanks, Alaska, when, unable to sleep because of the bright light, she began connecting the pagan word “aura” (which she translates as “an paidir geal” (A bright prayer)) with the *Aurora Borealis*, observing that “the magnetic lights work through the world, like the aura – this paidir geal – is to the human” [15]. These magnetic lights make their first appearance of the collection in the poem “Oidhe Chlainne Lir”, inspired by the old Irish myth of the Children of Lir, a family of three boys and a girl who are transformed into swans by their jealous stepmother, regaining their human form only when they are old and close to death. Ní Dhomhnaill re-vision the eldest child as a woman in a contemporary domestic scene, whose metamorphosis from human to swan is an analogy not only for the effects of ageing (“Chrapfadh rí na láimhe ort” [15, p. 80]/“Your wrist withered”), but also speechlessness. Attempting to apologise for her changing state, she finds that nothing comes from her mouth but “giobairisc do-aitheanta”/“unintelligible gibberish” [15, p. 80]. Like Ní Gríofa’s narrator in “A Jaw, Ajar”, and Friel’s character Sarah, in *Translations*, Ní Dhomhnaill’s subject shares an inability to articulate words that is intimately linked with the broader theme of linguistic loss. Ní Dhomhnaill’s speechless subject, however, is also situated within both a mythic structure, and an environment that erodes the boundaries between humans and nature, elements that characterise much of Ní Dhomhnaill’s oeuvre. As Louis de Paor observes, her “quest for integration blurs the rational distinction between the human and natural worlds so that the [...] body, becomes an extension of the landscape” [2, p. 290]. “Oidhe” concludes with reference to the northern lights: “An chaor adhaidh ag soilsíú oraibh ó am go chéile/faid is a bhíonn an ghaoth aduaidh de shíor ’bhur suaitheadh” [15, p. 82], which the poet Bernhard O’Donoghue interprets as “sometimes the Northern Lights swirling overhead;/the north wind buffeting you until you don’t know/what to think. And so on and so forth” [15, p. 83]. The mythic transformation from human to animal is augmented by the extra-textual euphonic connection between the human act of pagan prayer – “aura” – and one of the more colourful acts of nature – Aurora. The “bright

prayer” of human worship and the bright light of the natural world offers another parallel between language and nature.

In “An Chaor Aduaidh” (“Northern Lights”), the final poem of the collection, prayer turns to lament. The assonance of Ní Dhomhnaill’s opening lines “olagón bog binn na cruinne/ag casadh ar a fearsaid” [15, p. 98] is alliteratively translated by the poet Peter Fallon as “the mellow and melodious/lamentation of the globe/rounding on its axis” [15, p. 99], capturing the kind of internal euphony that Gearóid Mac Lochlainn considered necessary to poetic translations. With the final lines, however, it is worth employing Mac Lochlainn’s “straight” form of translation:

Titeann bréithre na teangan domhanda seo

chun talaimh ceann ar cheann  
i na néalta bána is uathne  
ar nós cuirtíní [15, p. 98]

This earthly tongue’s syllables  
are grounded once, again  
and then again, rumbling in dark clouds,  
bright, then green, like closing curtains [15, p. 99]

Fallon’s choice of “closing” curtains takes its cue from the falling (“Titeann”) of Ní Dhomhnaill’s conception, whose lines “Titeann bréithre na teangan domhanda seo” may be more literally translated as “Tongues of the world falling to the ground one by one”, but Ní Dhomhnaill’s “Titeann” contains more dramatic resonance than Fallon’s poetic “grounded” – both from a theatrical perspective, with the stage-like northern lights illuminating this final act; and because it points toward a separation of these tongues – in their dual role as both language and organ – from their host bodies. Once again, Ní Dhomhnaill links linguistic fate to apocalyptic imagery, as the final lines offer, in Amanda Bell’s words, “an apocalyptic vision”, which ends, literally, with “the final curtains” [1].

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Seamus Heaney’s death in 2013 caused shock-waves in the poetic community, and both *Northern Lights* and *Lies* pay tribute to his influence. Ní Dhomhnaill’s “In Memoriam Seamus Heaney” and Ní Gríofa’s “Bruitín” (“Mash”) both reference imagery from Heaney’s *Clearances*, a series of sonnets written in tribute to his mother. While Ní Gríofa echoes *Clearances*’ casually domestic act of communally peeling potatoes in the kitchen (“seasaimid le chéile sa chistin, ag scamhadh prátaí” [19, p. 28]), Ní Dhomhnaill borrows Heaney’s comparison between the clearance of great oak and his mother’s death, to illustrate Heaney’s almost literal impact: “Faoi mar a thitfeadh crann mor” [15, p. 96] / “As if a mighty tree collapsed”. With this arboreal imagery, Ní Dhomhnaill returns again to the great clearances of Ireland’s forests, and its parallel to a vanishing community, a point she explicitly connected to the state of Irish language decline in her earlier essay. Though Ní Gríofa’s tribute to Heaney seems rooted in the everyday, the humble potato might again gesture toward apocalyptic depths, and the devastation wrought by the famine – a theme

she too explicitly connected with a loss of language in “A Jaw, Ajar”. Heaney featured, also, in Brian Friel’s conception of *Translations* – not only was the poet a fellow member of Field Day, joining just as the nascent theatre company first staged *Translations*; but Heaney’s engagement in a series of translations paralleled Friel’s own preoccupation with the act, and Heaney’s treatment of *Buille Suibhne*, the subject of his earlier rumination on the coherence of translated texts, was published as *Sweeney Astray* by Field Day in 1984. Most significantly, however, one of Heaney’s Irish language Old-Irish translations appeared in the programme notes of *Translations* when it was first staged, offering an Irish-language gloss on resolutely English-language text.

Friel, Ní Dhomhnaill, and Ní Gríofa have variously engaged with the Irish language in their literature, but certain common themes can be said to characterise their engagement. Each have spoken to the perceived scarcity of the language – employing a “cúpla focail” (couple of words) of the Irish in their writing to emphasise the loss. Ní Dhomhnaill’s strenuous defence of the language, in her essay “Corpse”, ironically written in English, is interspersed with Irish quotations from old songs like “Cill Cais”, which emphasise the musicality, or euphony of the language. She includes also citations from her own poem, which speaks to her hope for the language, a hope which is couched in apocalyptic imagery. Friel’s *Translations* is even more sparsely populated with the language that forms the subject of his text, but the words that do appear offer an implicit critique of the systemic practices threatening to erase a community – Anna na mBreag, when translated, points to the “lie” at the heart of these events. Ní Gríofa’s sporadic Irish in “A Jaw Ajar” also speaks to loss, but her later *Lies* recuperates the “cúpla focail”, and re-frames them within the context of a creative bilingualism, and a more expansive multilingualism.

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