*“Traitors to the Prevailing Mythologies of the Four Others Provinces”?: A Tribute to Field Day on Their Twentieth Anniversary**

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Abstract: *Focusing on border-crossing as central to Field Day’s agenda, this article will try and assess the contribution made by the Derry-based company in terms of having created or enabled movement, both literally and metaphorically in the artistic and cultural scene in Ireland. To what extent have Field Day actually proved instrumental in challenging orthodoxies, in crossing or shifting critical boundaries, in clearing a new space ? Three main domains of intervention can be identified, starting with the most obvious : their challenge to the existence of partition in the way they toured Ireland and the theoretical counterpoint to this literal - though highly symbolic - spatial mobility, namely the company’s exploration of the fifth province. Another form of border crossing was Field Day’s insistence on imagining and articulating itself as a committed theatre company in which artists would not shy away from the political but would welcome it, would acknowledge their responsibility in shaping perceptions and generating debate. Thirdly, Field Day initiated a move within Irish studies towards the emergence and efflorescence of post-colonial analyses through their relentless efforts to examine the causes of the crisis as part of the legacy of a colonial situation, placing the emphasis on the northern crisis as central to any discussion of Irish identity and cultural politics.*

At the end of Brian Friel’s *Translations*, Field Day’s first production which opened in Derry in 1980, Jimmy Jack ponders the likely consequences of and reactions to his decidedly most unlikely union with the Greek goddess Pallas Athene ; her parents are not going to like it at all since marrying outside the tribe is tantamount to breaking a taboo: “you don’t cross those borders casually, both sides get very angry”.[1] Focusing on border-crossing as central to Field Day’s agenda, I would like to try and assess the contribution made by the company in terms of having created or enabled movement,

both literally and metaphorically in the artistic and cultural scene in Ireland. To what extent has Field Day actually proved instrumental in challenging orthodoxies, in crossing or shifting critical boundaries, in clearing a new space?

Three main domains of intervention can be identified, starting with the most obvious: their challenge to the existence of partition in the way they toured Ireland. "Trespassing", denying the existence of political borders was indeed the company's mandate from the outset. Stephen Rea and Brian Friel, the original founder members were both very keen that whatever productions Field Day put on stage in Derry should tour the whole of Ireland. As Stephen Rea recently put it "It was essentially, I guess, a political statement: we were northern but we belonged to the whole country, whatever we were talking about we wanted to address the whole country. By touring Ireland north and south we were doing something nobody else had done before."[2] Affirming an Ireland culture, beyond partition marked Field Day off as a nationalist project in essence, or was bound to be read in those terms by anyone eager to keep the border checkpoints in operation…

The theoretical counterpoint to this literal – though highly symbolic – spatial mobility was the company's exploration of the fifth province of the mind, the mythical centre of gravity of the island. This idea, pioneered by Field Day members in the early 80s in the wake of Richard Kearney and Mark Patrick Hedermann's *Crane Bag* version was developed into a thought-provoking conceit, influencing Heaney's *Sweeney Astray* in particular, though this ill-defined, imaginative space, "this place for dissenters, for traitors to the prevailing mythologies of the four other provinces"[3] as Friel elegantly and eloquently put it, proved, in the long run, most elusive, as Shaun Richards, among others, has shown. It was a useful concept though as it did combine many of the qualities I would tend to associate with Field Day material – the impulse towards creation and adaptation instead of straightforward appropriation, the hankering for a place that could by-pass the dichotomies and polarities of the existing situation, a taste for the liminal, the in-between – though of course such a space, off-centre, off the map could easily degenerate into the fifth province "or what you will"… The way the phrase gained currency in the cultural and political vocabulary of the period – though it disappeared from "Field Day speak" after 1986 – shows that there was indeed a space to be imagined (and since Anderson's *Imagined Communities* we all know how central imagination is to social and political identity formation) though whether the fifth province was a form of "deterritorialisation" in the Deleuze/Guattary version or just another name for the intangible nation of Ireland ("a cultural state out of which the possiblity of a political state might follow" in Friel's idiosyncratic version[4]) remains open to discussion, not so much a place outside history perhaps as a place very much inscribed in history, contemporary Northern Irish, Derry history even…

Another form of border crossing was Field Day's insistence on imagining and articulating itself as a committed theatre company in which artists would not shy away from the political but would welcome it, would acknowledge their responsibility in shaping perceptions and generating debate. Seamus Deane in particular has consistently

argued against the separation of politics and literature or culture: “politics is a danger to us but then we’re maybe a danger to politics as well, in a sense. There’s no freedom from politics. We are politicians in a sense by being artists”[5]. A perfect symbol of this interaction could be the company’s use of the Guildhall in Derry as a theatrical space. Having shouldered that burden, Field Day went on to devise a double channel of communication with the audience; first the plays and tours engineered by Rea and Friel, then the pamphlets which started being published after 1983. Here again they were crossing boundaries, initiating a dialogue or rather a dialectic between the two mutually supportive sides of their activities. Deane, the chief architect of the critical enterprise, sees the two parts of the project as nevertheless having the same aim:

> I see both the pamphlets and the plays as exercises in the critique of various forms of authority that have become illicit or ineffective or anachronistic and yet refuse to concede to new conditions (or to conspire in their own demise). Our belief then was that the northern state never had legitimacy and the Republic’s legitimacy was severely qualified. This is still my opinion.[6]

Two things need detain us here. First the emphasis placed on the combination of modes of expression: both the page and the stage were to be used to explore ideas, each genre drawing on its specific language and strength and here I would second Marilynn Richtarik’s overall assessment of the language of the pamphlets as being more controversial than that of the plays[7]. This mobility between the creative and the critical, the realisation that it is vital to foster analysis as well as creation has meant that many Field Day members themselves were happy to cross the borders between genres, between creative and critical practice in an effort to promote self-definition instead of leaving it to others from the outside to come and offer analyses. They happily took on different roles, with critics turning poets or playwrights and vice-versa. It is largely within this context that one should consider Paulin’s reworking of the *Antigone* or Heaney’s later adaptation of Sophocles – *The Cure at Troy* (1990) – and the focus placed on the adaptation of classics, in practice a crossing of linguistic, temporal and spacial borders. They were bringing nineteenth-century century Russia and Ancient Greece to Ireland, to tease out what those plays had to say about Ireland there and then, releasing the subversive potential of those time-honoured classics by freeing them from the conventional (ie. English) modes of representation. And first and foremost they wanted to have them ring out in an idiom that was recognisably Irish, a basically very nationalist though also very pragmatic claim (for who would deny that in terms of accent, lexicon and even syntax the Irish variety of English does not have its specificity?) though it is a far cry from the backward-looking nostalgia of an Irish-speaking Ireland.

The other point of the Deane quote I used earlier is of course the nationalist or more accurately republican element it contains: Field Day’s reiterated challenge to the authority of both Northern Ireland and the Republic proved unsurprisingly unpopular in many quarters. Such a stance smacked not only of northerness, as Field Day claimed,

but of republicanism, and this at a time when the IRA and Provisional Sinn Fein, in the wake of the hunger strikes, were gaining in popularity. The relentlessness with which Deane and the others kept returning to the South's doubtful legitimacy was also uncomfortable for those in the Republic who saw it as having either fully recovered from the colonial trauma, or even never having had a colonial experience in the first place.

And this enables us to move to the third point I would like to raise since it was also largely Field Day who initiated a move within Irish studies towards the emergence and efflorescence of post-colonial analyses through their relentless efforts to examine the causes of the crisis as part of the legacy of a colonial situation, a crisis that had to be diagnosed accurately and faced up to honestly. Central to an exploration of the complexities of Ireland's history on the stage was Friel's sensitive and ironic dyptich, *Translations* and *Making History*. Post-colonial readings of Ireland's literature and society are now commonplace, for better and for worse, but one needs to remember that this was not the norm when Field Day started out, back in the early 1980s. In this instance, the company did succeed in its role as agent provocateur, performing a consciousness-raising exercise and hammering out versions of truths that had become unpalatable in the Republic in particular. Their emphasis on the northern crisis as central to any discussion of Irish identity, their version of cultural politics constantly hinging on this facing up to the colonial legacy caused them to lose favour not only with northern critics with a broadly unionist outlook, like Edna Longley or John Wilson Foster, but also with those who, in Deane's words "would seek to deny the realities of colonial rule in Ireland – the neo-liberal, ex-Marxist Official IRA and glib journalists."[8] At a time when revisionism was becoming the new orthodoxy, Field Day's rhetoric did prove a major irritant though, needless to say, promoting a post-colonial model of analysis is not risk-free and can lead to oversimplifications. Many historians would be loath to include Ireland in the list of "colonised" countries or would legitimately seek to qualify that label in many ways because of what it is now politically correct to call "the totality of relationships within these islands". Though there is little doubt that patterns of colonial rule obtained in Ireland, an additional and by no means negligible problem in the real world is that the vocabulary of imperialism and colonialism has been taken over and largely discredited by Sinn Fein.

Hence Deane's interest in a critic like Said, or the production by Field Day of plays like Tom Kilroy's *Double Cross* and Terry Eagleton's *Saint Oscar*. To my mind, *Double Cross* (1986) deserves to be seen as axiomatic, central to the whole Field Day canon: this brilliant play fulfills Field Day's cultural-political bill while remaining so controlled and dazzling a piece of theatre that no critic could overlook its virtuosity. Like *Translations*, *Double Cross* keeps drawing attention to itself as drama, as play, making it impossible to focus on the politics of the piece without fully taking on board its experimental audacity. The "political core", the exploration of the instability of Irish identity, is deeply inscribed in the form of the play itself with its two acts and shape-changing protagonists; it is not superimposed nor in any way separable from it. The

play in many ways ironises borders; by looking at identity in a colonial/postcolonial situation through a double perspective, by twinning or yoking together the two personae of Brendan Bracken and William Joyce, Kilroy teases out the absurdity and tragedy of a re-constructed identity, a self-fashioning based on denial: "When a man wipes out his past and invents his own future he may have criminal or artistic tendencies. On the other hand he may be simply acting out a condition of the culture from which he is trying so desperately to escape. Both men left Ireland in the twenties. At the precise time when Ireland declared its independence of England."[9] The movements of Joyce and Bracken, from Ireland to England, from England to Germany, from loyalty to betrayal and vice-versa are mirror images of each other, reflections of the colonial trauma they have internalised, via the roles their fathers played in Ireland (IRA volunteer vs "loyal" informer), a condition that haunts them and that they are doomed to repeat:

> Actress: Ladies and gentlemen ! We cannot vouch for the accuracy of anything that is going to follow – […] It has been put together to make a point.
> Actor: Why does the victim always try to imitate the oppressor?
> Actress: Women are well aware of this condition
> Actor: Men only discover it when they are political underdogs
> Actress: Imitate that you may be free
> Actor: There is also the momentum of colonialism which operates like an inverted physics.
> Actress: The further out on the periphery, the stronger the pull to the centre.
> Actor: Every metropolis is thronged with provincials.
> Actress: Each trying to be more metropolitan than the other. And so, to play.[10]

With plays of that calibre, Field Day did raise theatrical standards in Ireland and, in the process, attracted the attention of academics and commentators from within and from outside Ireland who were drawn to the theatrical achievements of the company while also proving increasingly interesting to cultural commentators eager to take up or challenge the post-colonial mode of analysis pioneered by Field Day and Seamus Deane in particular.

Yet there are also areas in which one can rightly feel that Field Day's record is less obviously satisfactory. What about the reality of their supposedly pluralist agenda, the inclusiveness or otherwise of the fifth province ? What about their contribution to bridging the sectarian divide ? And what about women? In 1984 Deane was already alerting his Field Day colleagues to the limits of their influence: "It's no good just performing our plays and selling pamphlets to people we know. There's no point in continuing unless we can get through to Unionists."[11] One can speculate whether the presence on the board of directors of three protestants and three catholics (more or less all lapsed anyway) was a sectarian balancing act or an accident; Marilynn Richtarik says Heaney claimed it was done on purpose, Stephen Rea swore to me it was sheer luck, no doubt both are right… The nature of Field Day's activities and rhetoric however left little doubt that they were working from a broadly nationalist – or at least non-

unionist – perspective which may have appeared more or less reconstructed and sophisticated to their many critics and supporters. The years 1984-85 saw a structuring of the opposition to Field Day and their discourse which they should have anticipated. It was at that point that they decided to commission a less well-known series of pamphlets that also testifies to their "border-crossing" urges, their desire for intervention outside a strictly literary sphere : with the series entitled "The Protestant Idea of Liberty" they were effectively handing over to the other side or tradition, and seeking to refresh memories as to the importance of the Presbyterian influence in the 1798 United Irishmen revolution. No great gesture towards the unionist community but still an acknowledgement of a branch of the protestant tradition Paulin and Rea in particular were particularly proud to have encouraged. They went on to try and alter the public and critical perception of the group as too green by asking Stewart Parker, the Belfast protestant playwright (a fellow student of Heaney's at Queen's) to write *Pentecost* for them, an admirable play in which translating out of one's prejudiced way of thinking becomes the key to redemption. Parker promoted spiritual movement more than political action, seeking to transcend or bypass the political as an inadequate response to a deep crisis of faith, faith in the power of forgiveness, faith in oneself and in the future. *Pentecost* rings true with a profoundly humanist, protestant message of hope, of change made possible at a time when everything in Northern Ireland looked stagnant and bleak.

Now it is hard, impossible actually, to deny that Field Day were six (and later seven) men in search of… whatever, and that not a single woman had a place on the board of directors. Worse still, with one exception only, no woman director or playwright ever contributed to a field day production. Whether that should be read as mysogyny or the result of circumstances is for each individual to decide. I would venture to suggest that such a glaring absence was first and foremost an all too accurate reflection of the place of women in Northern Irish society in theatre and in academe at the time… Since then, the Northern Ireland's Women Coalition has highlighted the abysmally small space offered to women in the political sphere… Whatever the cause, it certainly was a pity and Field Day were made to pay the price for this all-male cast when the long-awaited *Anthology of Irish Writing* came out, as we all know since the limited (though by no means inexistent) place granted to writing by women in the three volumes became an object of public debate and vilification. The ideological underpinnings of the project were most glaringly exposed: here was one major "division", the gender gap, that Field Day had visibly not set out to explore or even take into account, and as ill-luck would have it, precisely at a time when the Republic, long deaf to women's demands in very basic areas, was suddenly waking up to the reality and existence of women and feminism! Part of the "feminist" reaction was no doubt orchestrated and rather disingenuous but there was a genuine case to be answered and Seamus Deane, in his role as general editor was and still is not prepared to deny it as his decision to commission a fourth volume devoted to women's writing – in preparation for many years and rumoured to be about to be published, at long last – instead of seeking to justify himself amply demonstrates.

Born twenty years ago out of an instinct between two extraordinarily gifted and committed theatre enthusiasts, Field Day expanded and set about imagining their community, their constituency as Friel would no doubt have put it and it has been Ireland's good fortune that they were thus empowered to put forward their version of cultural politics, making an exemplary creative and critical contribution to Irish culture. I would like to share Mary Holland's conviction that "Field Day helped to promote a more inclusive concept of what it means to be Irish [and made] it possible to talk about nationalism without seeming to pose a threat to others"[12] but I am not so sure. What is clear, however, is that they made rethinking the complexities of ideological stances like nationalism within an Irish and northern Irish context both necessary and more rewarding. Not since the Irish Literary Theatre had such an ambitious project been thought out and given expression. Their success should not be measured solely in terms of what they themselves achieved or produced, though that in itself is considerable (twelve plays, six series of pamphlets and a massive anthology) but also in terms of the reactions and oppositions they have generated over the years: the many positive reactions of those who followed in their footsteps, the negative, often virulent reactions of those who wished to contest the company's discourse and found they had to create a critical idiom and perspective that moved beyond the old stereotypes to do so. Increasingly I find myself wondering what one – myself included – could possibly mean when assessing whether or not Field Day has been successful? It is tempting, and no doubt true, to say that they surely could have been more genuinely pluralist but then would they have mounted so powerful a challenge to stereotypes and ways of thinking if they had been less adversarial in some of their pronouncements ? Their intervention did amount to a seismic shift in Irish cultural politics: whatever discussion was taking place in the eighties simply could not bypass them; they had become an almost compulsory point of reference. They were ubiquitous, and even today their legacy is everywhere visible. Most major commentators on Ireland's literature and culture have a direct or indirect, friendly or antagonistic connection with Field Day: Deane and Paulin of course, but also Declan Kiberd, Terence Brown, Terry Eagleton, Luke Gibbons, John Wilson Forster, Roy Foster, Edna Longley, David Lloyd and contless others.

In his recent study, *Modernisation: Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1969-1992*, Conor McCarthy blames Field Day for what he calls "its failure to forge a new, truly popular theatre.[13] There is indeed some truth in this criticism; Field Day were not into agit-prop or indeed into straightforward community theatre like the Belfast women of Charabanc… yet even if the company proved only partly successful in extricating theatre from its affluent, middle-class Dublin "ghetto" at least they did try… They did go to the people, taking plays to small towns where no play had been put on for years, thereby reaching out to an audience for whom going to the annual Field Day production was an experience, an event. Liam Neeson, now a star of the screen, recalled touring Carrickmore, in Co. Tyrone with Field Day back in 1980 when he was starting out as a professional with *Translations* (he played the part of Doalty): "I learned that the play would start at nine.

That was so the cows could be milked and the farmers would have a chance to get washed up before coming to the play"[14]. A company that can take that kind of daily reality into account cannot have been the elitist coterie it is sometimes made out to be…

Field Day did energise, though not single-handedly of course, an Irish theatrical and cultural scene which was, in many ways, stagnant until they came along. They put Northern Ireland and Derry centre-stage, commissioned and produced a dozen works by Irish playwrights of the highest calibre, generated a lot of reactions in the literary, cultural and political quarters. They toured Ireland, north and south with plays that did address burning issues, forging a theatre that was relevant to the people they were addresssing. I would suggest that the success of Irish theatre in London since the mid-1980s is due in no small part to their sustained policy of transferring Field Day productions across the water to London venues, Hampstead Theatre, Tricycle, Royal Court, English National Theatre, thus helping to build up an audience with an appetite for Irish plays.

Sadly, the theatre part of the project has attracted but limited attention so far, which is in keeping with the company's own insistence on its role in the field of cultural politics, meaning that the pragmatic, practical but also aesthetic contribution made by Field Day in their truly dazzling theatrical productions often went virtually unnoticed. Stephen Rea recently expressed his regret that the extraordinary quality of the costumes and lighting for example in early Field Day productions – *Three Sisters* in particular – should have passed many Irish critics by; though wasn't it inevitable when all the interviews given by Friel and Rea himself at the time focused on the importance of the play using an idiom Irish people could feel comfortable with, thus laying the emphasis once again on the politics of the project as against the theatrical quality and actual performance of the piece? The two were inexorably linked in both the company members' and their audience's/ critics' minds, and as the years went by this tendency was only reinforced, culminating in the anthology which overshadowed the other activities. The overall coherence of the project came at this cost: the success of Field Day's intervention in cultural politics depended heavily on the productions highlighting the centrality and relevance of the political, a feature that justifies Desmond Bell's claim that Field Day had gradually moved "from a politicised aesthetic towards an aestheticised politics"[15]. That the importance of the literary/ critical part of the project gradually superseded the theatrical impulse is fairly obvious, but let us be thankful that it did not happen until Field Day had made a more than significant contribution to Irish and European theatre. To quote *Translations* again and thus come full circle, Field Day deserves to be seen, in hindsight, as " a worthy enterprise" indeed…

Notes

* This article is a revised version of a paper given in July 2000 at the IASIL Bath conference.

1 Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber, 1980), 68.

2 Martine Pelletier, "'Creating Ideas to Live By': An interview with Stephen Rea", *Sources*, N°9 (Autumn 2000), 48-65.
3 John Gray, "Field Day Five Years On", *The Linen Hall Review* (Summer 1985), 7.
4 Friel interviewed by Fintan O'Toole, "The Man from God Knows Where". *In Dublin*, 28 October 1982.
5 "Brian Friel and Field Day", RTE programme broadcast on 14 February 1983. Text printed in Paul Delaney's *Brian Friel in Conversation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 190.
6 Deane, letter to the author, 25 May 2000.
7 See Marilynn Richtarik's *Acting Between the Lines, Field Day and Irish Cultural Politics* 1980-84 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) 239-242.
8 Deane, letter to the author, 25 May 2000.
9 Tom Kilroy, *Double Cross* (London: Faber, 1986), 19.
10 *Ibid*., 22.
11 Ciaran Carty and Richard Kearney, "Why Ireland needs a fifth province". *Sunday Independent*, 22 January 1984.
12 Mary Holland, "The Trouble With Peace: Times Have Changed for Derry's Cultural Provos" *The Observer*, 26 February 1995.
13 Conor McCarthy, *Modernisation: Crisis and Culture in Ireland 1969-1992* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2000), 227.
14 "The Big Fella", *Irish America*, January 1996.
15 Desmond Bell, "Culture and Politics in Ireland: Postmodern Revisions", *History of European Ideas*, Vol 16, n°1-3, 141-46; quoted by Conor McCarthy, 227.