Changing the Terms

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Published by University of Ottawa Press

Simon, Sherry and Paul St-Pierre.
Changing the Terms: Translating in the Postcolonial Era.

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CHAPTER 9

A GESTURE TO INDICATE A PRESENCE: TRANSLATION, DIALECT AND FIELD DAY THEATRE COMPANY’S QUEST FOR AN IRISH IDENTITY

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Lt. George Yolland in Brian Friel’s play Translations finds himself in something of a romantic quandary: he is enamoured of Maire, a Gaelic-speaking peasant girl, but he finds himself unable to express his affection, as he speaks only English. For the first half of the play, the would-be lovers expend a great deal of effort in failed communications—they try gesturing at each other, speaking their own languages loudly and slowly, employing an unwilling translator, and Maire even attempts to use Latin as a possible neutral medium. But it is not until George hits upon the idea of reciting the only Gaelic he knows, the place names he has been learning during his stay in Baile Beag, Maire’s village, that he finally meets with success. As Maire turns to him and answers each hill with another hill and each fort with another fort, the lovers slowly move toward each other across the stage, using the local scenery in a kind of call and response. Of course translating the words themselves gets an audience nowhere, for it is not in what the names themselves mean but rather in what Maire and George have made them mean that they gain importance here. In this moment, in the ridges and lakes the lovers use as stepping stones to intimacy, Maire and George quite literally find a common ground and construct upon it their own personal language, a “dialect,” if you will, which draws on a shared understanding of the world and thus reinforces and expresses their connection to one another.
This scene is emblematic of the linguistic attitudes *Translations*—Northern Ireland’s Field Day Theatre Company’s first production—expresses, for in the absence of a clear central character, the play takes language as its focus. Such a “dialect of endearment,” as Tom Paulin, one of Field Day’s directors, would call the language of George and Maire’s encounter, gathers together a “hoard of relished words” which creates an intimacy among speakers by acting “as a kind of secret sign [that] serves to exclude the outside world” (1985a, 16). The ability to create such connections makes dialect itself a powerful tool for postcolonial writing, particularly in the world of the theatre, which offers a writer far greater potential to forge an immediate connection with a local audience than is available in other comparatively silent genres: local actor and local audience form an aural bond, and it becomes immediately apparent, based on which observers laugh at the jokes, who is or is not an outsider. For a company wishing to broaden the Irish theatre audience by bringing plays to smaller communities around Northern Ireland and the Republic, which rarely saw professional theatre, dialect has functioned as a significant means of connectivity, and Field Day has not only explored the potential of Hiberno-English—a variety of English that is strongly influenced by Gaelic in its lexicon, syntax and idiom—in its productions, but also pondered the dialect’s significance in its pamphlet series. Moreover, in its first four years, Field Day produced three dialect translations of foreign dramas, a fact which emphasizes the ability of local language to make such work more accessible to an audience which might previously have only encountered these plays in standard English versions.

The Politics of Dialect

Dialect is by definition a linguistic hybrid, and it is particularly significant that a company co-founded by a playwright who has himself stated that he is not interested in the revival of the Irish language would make such prominent use of it (see Richtarik 1994, 37). According to founders Brian Friel and Stephen Rea, and their co-directors, Field Day wants to redefine Irishness in the context of the Northern crisis “by producing analyses of the established opinions, myths, and stereotypes which [have] become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation” (Field Day 1985, vii). The Gaelic language, as a number of nationalist attempts to revive it have shown, certainly qualifies as one of those enduring myths of a unitary Irish culture, and Field Day’s interest in dialect and its ability to express adequately a new sense of Irishness is itself a significant challenge to that myth: the company, as W.B. Worthen tells us, “sees ‘Irish’ identity to be inextricably bound to the languages of Ireland” (my emphasis) rather than to the ancient
native tongue alone (1995, 24), and dialect becomes a way of negotiating between the English/Gaelic poles. As Translations argues, linguistic hybridity also suggests cultural hybridity, and if Field Day’s first play attempts to define a close relationship between the nuances of dialect and the fusion of identities that embodies Northern Ireland, its later translations have built upon this model, although with somewhat varying degrees of success, in an attempt to solidify that shifting identity, not only in theory but also within the walls of theatre itself.

That Maire and George’s encounter reaches the audience on an emotional level but significantly not on a linguistic level reveals several characteristics of the milieu that created Translations. Friel’s rendering of this encounter is at once the most poignant moment of the play and the most futile, beautiful in its innocent belief in the power of romance and hopelessly naïve in its refusal to acknowledge the realities of the moment. On one level, Maire and George simply represent the traditional union of “male” England and “female” Ireland, yet Friel is unwilling to allow us such an easy association; after all, George is rather too sympathetic and too ambivalent about his status as invader to typify Empire, and Maire is rather too ready to leave her homeland to become its feminine embodiment. In attempting to define a world for themselves, Maire and George merely conjure up “the spirit of the past, of names that no longer exist” because they have literally been erased from the map (Zach 1988, 88). The new map, of course, is an English one, which George and his fellow soldiers have come to Baile Beag to create as part of the Ordnance Survey of the 1830s. George’s job, with the help of his friend and translator Owen, is to determine English-language equivalents for all Gaelic place names—each ridge, fort and rock—and to record these new designations in the Namebook, a document which becomes the physical symbol of linguistic change. Maire and George’s literal use of Gaelic marks them as romantic holdouts and cuts them off from the English-speaking soldiers (represented onstage by standard English) and the Gaelic-speaking villagers (represented by Hiberno-English) as well as—and perhaps more importantly—from a primarily English-speaking audience, a circumstance that attests to the success of the historical moment the play describes. Indeed, the lovers’ retreat into their own linguistic world represents a flight into history rather than an understanding of the present, a move which blinds them to the powerful social forces marshalling around them. Friel’s characterization of the only exclusively Gaelic moment in the play, and his depiction of the violence and confusion that follow it, reinforce the play’s conclusion—for which Friel was of course largely indebted to George Steiner’s After Babel—that “words ... are not immortal” and that to retain “a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact” (Translations, 51) is to “fossilize” (81).
Privileging Hiberno-English over the literal use of Gaelic in the play is a way of acknowledging the play’s roots in the contemporary moment; it asserts some continuity of culture in the face of a new linguistic reality. In this vein, many critics of the play have noted that Friel employs the dialect as a way of linguistically marking his Irish characters, yet many have stopped there, and thus have not sufficiently interrogated the ends to which the play employs dialect. Michael Toolan, for instance, correctly points out that Hiberno-English is sometimes meant to represent Gaelic and sometimes meant to represent standard English, but his argument does not consider the further implications of these important shifts: instead, he elides the differences between dialect and the standard by offering only that the similarity of the two languages lends the play great comic potential when people who appear to be speaking the same language cannot understand one another (1988, 143). Worthen, too, argues that dialect “becomes the medium through which all other languages—including ‘Standard English’—are represented,” and, by pointing to a number of moments in the play when the audience cannot immediately tell which language the characters’ words are meant to represent, asserts the power of dialect to disrupt the standard (1995, 32-33). While both of these observations are accurate up to a point, Friel’s manipulation of dialect here has a farther, deeper resonance, and by allowing his multilingual characters to switch back and forth between standard English and Hiberno-English, he permits them to demonstrate the fluctuations in their cultural consciousness at any given moment, rather than simply indicating which language they are speaking: the representation of speech here alerts an audience not only to the slipperiness of language but also to individual characters’ need to reconcile their disparate poles of identity. This method suggests that with the change in language comes a change in self-understanding, or conversely that the new language comes to reflect an already altered culture: the community that speaks Hiberno-English is by its very nature unlike the community that speaks Gaelic, and thus the two languages must be employed differently. Particularly through his multilingual characters, Friel reveals that both their speech and their identities are irrevocably hybrid. Indeed, the play’s translation expert even bears a double name—Owen to the villagers and Roland to the soldiers—and the play at one point attempts to fuse these two to see what might come of the composite. If Ireland is itself divided, and the North more obviously so, then the play raises the question of how language itself can come to represent both that disjunction and its solution. As such, the play has far more to say about the state of affairs in modern Ireland than it does about the facts of Irish history.
Uncertain Affiliations

British colonialism certainly played a decisive role in the declining fortunes of the Gaelic tongue, but internal forces exerted a fair amount of pressure themselves. Sean Connolly's critique in *Theatre Ireland* of the play's presentation of history calls Friel to task for figuring "the decline of Irish ... as something imposed by outside forces on a passive and culturally self-sufficient community" (1987, 42). Yet the very counter-examples Connolly cites, only to dismiss as irrelevant, reveal the playwright's concern to present the variety of factors involved in the creation of a linguistic identity. Friel's audience can hear that language is already slipping and changing, adapting to the new needs of the moment even before the soldiers appear onstage. Maire, for instance, has already begun learning English, although not very thoroughly, before the mapping project makes this skill a necessity. Still, she can never quite pronounce correctly that one sentence her Aunt Mary taught her, as she always renders the word "maypole" as "maypoll." That substitution of the short "o" in "poll" for the long "o" of "pole" clearly marks Maire as a Gaelic, or here Hiberno-English, speaker, for it is the same vowel shift that other monolingual Gaelic speakers in the play use when they render the word "old" as "aul." Bridget and Doalty, fellow classmates who are the most consistent Hiberno-English speakers in the play, employ this pronunciation frequently, as when Bridget critiques the quality of her writing equipment saying, "D'you hear the whistles of this aul slate?" (20). Yet Maire has set her sights on America, albeit out of necessity, and when she demands in Act One that Hugh teach her English, she succeeds in pronouncing that vowel sound correctly: quoting Daniel O'Connell, she offers with perfect pronunciation, "The old language is a barrier to modern progress" (28). O'Connell himself represents one of the most profound native influences on the decline of the Irish language, and that Maire cites him and alters her pronunciation while making the reference reveals a shift in her loyalties, precipitated by factors internal to the community, rather than her language, which the substance of her argument itself reveals must be Gaelic. The fact that Maire's new attitude spills over into her speech patterns marks her subconscious acceptance of a conscious decision, and thus her rejection of "the old language" is an important assertion of a new, particularly modern cultural identity.

More pronounced than the shifts in Maire's language are the movements of Owen's dialect. As the play's hired translator, Owen straddles the boundary between English and Gaelic and finds himself constantly manoeuvring between these two poles. Yet, as with Maire, what the audience hears is an inaccurate guide to the literal language he is supposed to be speaking. When asked to translate the British Captain Lancey's initial orders to his father's hedge school class, Owen simplifies Lancey's syntax
but does not communicate the directives in Hiberno-English; instead, his language, as he acts in this official capacity, loses most of its local flavour, as he adheres instead to a recognizably British standard. Similarly, when Owen is obviously speaking English to George, his syntax sounds Gaelic. As Act Two opens, the two men are simply talking business, going through the tedious process of checking the name “Bun na hAbhann” against various registry lists. Owen’s language here reveals no distinct dialect markers until the conversation begins to take on a more jovial tone. As Owen good-naturedly quizzes George on the Irish he has been teaching him, he tells him, “Put English on that, Lieutenant... We’ll have you fluent at the Irish before the summer’s over” (42). This “put X on Y” construction appears periodically throughout the play in Bridget’s query, “What name did she put on [the baby]?” (25) and Hugh’s panicked, “Put some order on things!” (32). The form itself is a common feature of Hiberno-English, derived from Gaelic’s affinity for expressing important concepts with nouns rather than verbs, as it overlays nouns by “putting” one on top of the other rather than specifying an action, such as “naming” or “translating,” to be done to one of the nouns. That Owen slips into what sounds like dialect here gives the audience a sense of the growing friendship between the two men, and as the conversation progresses and Yolland begins to reveal his personal history, Owen continues to speak to him in dialect. The usage marks Owen’s national affiliation, his sympathy with home rather than his language of choice, which here must be English, for George not only speaks little Gaelic as of yet but also still worries about his position as an outsider. More importantly, however, Owen’s dialect marks his acceptance of George into his own circle; as the English Hibernophile despairs of ever truly integrating himself into the life of Baile Beag, even if he does acquire the language, Owen reassures him, “You can learn to decode us” (48). For an audience that might not understand Gaelic but does recognize the intimacy that dialect suggests, Friel’s linguistic device intensifies our understanding of this growing bond. Moreover, Owen’s assertion, both of his own position as part of the “us” and of George’s ability eventually to join that group, broadens the boundaries of national identification.

Owen’s statement finds its proof in George’s tendency to slip into Hiberno-English at certain moments in the play. Indeed, just as he is beginning his closest identification with Maire, he adopts her Irish syntax, mimicking the form of a dialect he doesn’t even understand. Contemplating the others’ reaction to their departure from the dance, George asks, “I wonder did anyone notice us leave” (59) instead of the more standard “I wonder if anyone noticed us leave,” and in so doing employs an untransformed question, an element of Hiberno-English syntax which closely mirrors the Gaelic treatment of imbedded questions (Todd 1989, 44). Similarly, he mimics Maire’s particularly Irish use of the progressive, rather than the past partici-
pie: she exclaims, “The grass must be wet. My feet are soaking,” and he replies, even though he has no idea what she has just said, with the same form, “Your feet must be wet. The grass is soaking” rather than the more standard “soaked.” Such a preference for the “-ing” form is a common feature of Hiberno-English as the adjective mimics the gerunds and progressive verb forms which seem to be the English rhythmic equivalents of Gaelic verbal nouns (Todd, 72). After hearing the hedge school students pepper their speech with the construction throughout the play, it is difficult not to notice that a British soldier, who has thus far spoken only the standard, seems to have crossed a boundary by joining them.

George’s linguistic shift here is quite telling, and, in this moment, the play seems to hold out the possibility of a more inclusive definition of Irishness, one which incorporates both the Catholic native community and the Protestant settler community. After all, setting out to establish a Northern theatre company with particularly Northern concerns meant that ideally Field Day would attempt to negotiate both sides of the region’s tumultuous political divide. Yet following through on this ideal has not always been easy. When in an effort to broaden its base of playwrights Field Day commissioned a piece from Protestant writer David Rudkin in 1983, they seemed to ignore the possibility of diversity of opinion within the Protestant community, and when Rudkin’s *The Saxon Shore* turned out to be vehemently critical of the Plantation settlers, represented in the play by bloodthirsty Saxon werewolves, the board, which has been generally perceived as “green” in spite of their more non-partisan goals, was understandably reluctant to launch a production. What better way to cut off communication than to have your biggest gesture of inclusiveness condemned for bigotry? Field Day settled instead that year for *Boesman and Lena* by Athol Fugard, whose background made him, according to Rudkin, “the next best thing to an Ulster Protestant,” and whose distance from the Irish question made him a somewhat safer choice in a volatile political atmosphere (Richtarik 1994, 203).

There is nothing easy about having to recreate one’s sense of identity, and in *Translations*, even Hugh, who believes that Irish culture has a much greater affinity with classical culture than with England and reflects this in his speech not only by speaking Latin but also by often employing a Latinate structure in his English, lapses, in a moment of panic, into Hiberno-English: as the story he tries to tell from the *Aeneid* trails off at the end of the play, the elaborate façade which insulated him from the world around him crumbles, and he curses in the dialect, “What the hell’s wrong with me. Sure I know it backways. I’ll begin again” (83). By employing the dialect word “backways” and prefacing his sentence with the Hiberno-English filler “sure,” Hugh shows the new reality of his Irish identity. This “new” identity cannot live in the past but must be allowed to evolve; it is an identity which,
as his infrequent use of dialect shows, he has spent most of the play trying to subdue, and it finally emerges as his stories of antiquity fail him.

Communication and Subversion

Each of these characters is thrust by choice or force into a new Ireland, one which must cope with the realities of the world outside its borders, and it is with that awareness that they must begin to fashion new identities. Yet the need to recreate oneself does not equate with a lack of identity, and although Hugh at the end finds that the story he knows “backwards” fails him, he does not cease trying to tell it, for only in that effort can he find himself. Similarly, Field Day’s translation efforts serve, like Doyalty’s tampering with the soldiers’ equipment, as a “gesture ... to indicate ... a presence” (17) while expanding the scope of what that presence can mean. Three of Field Day’s first six plays were translations of foreign works: Friel’s own rendering of Chekhov’s Three Sisters, Paulin’s The Riot Act (a version of Sophocles’s Antigone) and Derek Mahon’s High Time (a translation of Molière’s The School for Husbands). It might seem strange at first that a company devoted to creating an Irish sense of identity would be so intent on producing foreign plays, especially considering the argument that the company’s production of Boesman and Lena suffered at the box office because it “was not new, was not Irish, and was not by Brian Friel” (Richtarik 1994, 212). But in choosing to translate some of the central canonical texts of Western drama, Field Day writers gave themselves the opportunity to place their stamp on these texts, a form of dramatic appropriation which, as Worthen proposes, has made translation “a staple means of political critique in the theatre” in general and in postcolonial theatre in particular (1995, 22). If, as Benjamin has argued, “even the greatest translation is destined to become part of the growth of its own language” (1992, 75), then Field Day’s efforts can be seen as an attempt to stimulate that growth by establishing, or at the very least perpetuating, a Hiberno-English tradition.

Translation also offered the dual possibility of communication and subversion, a potential multiplied in the theatre, which can use layered modes of expression. Gilbert and Tompkins argue that the theatre’s ability to employ not only dialogue but gesture and visual cues as well to refine interpretation makes it a particularly effective mode of counter-discourse, as body language, lighting and set design can either support or undermine the meaning of the spoken word, an ability which also expands the capacity of the dramatic translator to convey the nuances of, or obliquely critique, the language of the original (1996, 18). While such manipulation may not produce an entirely “faithful” translation, resulting in a finished product that is closer to Goethe’s definition of parodistic translation rather than the higher trans-
Of the three texts by Friel, Paulin and Mahon, only Mahon’s fits the traditional definition of translation: the author was sufficiently fluent in French to have already produced other works from that language (Richtarik 1994, 229). Mahon himself calls *High Time* a “free translation” and offers in his preface a rationale for altering the play’s setting to make the action more comprehensible to a contemporary audience by “go[ing] for immediacy instead of nostalgia” (7). Yet the contemporary audience Mahon’s translation targets is not as particularly Irish as one might expect, for although the stage directions specify that “the action takes place in Ireland” (10), only the Georgian doorways and the occasional Irish pronunciation clarify the setting at all. Indeed, Mahon’s language itself adheres quite closely to the standard, with Tom’s proclamation that people like his brother Archie are “a bunch of eejits” (11) and Isabel’s exclamation “for Jesus’ sake” (32) serving as rare markers of national identity. Perhaps Mahon’s most ingenious use of dialect is in the occasional fudged rhyme: employing Irish pronunciation can make rhymes of “Val” and well (“waal”) or “honour” and wonder (“wonhour”). Yet as Richtarik’s analysis of the text’s split words and odd phrasings reveals (1994, 231-33), Mahon relies much more heavily on other methods to craft his verse, consequently allowing the dialect to enliven his text only sporadically. Thus Field Day’s most direct early translation seems to have the least to say about the question of language and nation-building; for the “non-political” topic of romance, Mahon seems to have felt that the generic standard would serve.

Unlike *High Time*, neither Paulin’s nor Friel’s play functions as a conventional translation. Rather, both were “translated” from traditional English sources into dialect: Friel, who knows no Russian, created his play by collecting a number of English-language versions and writing his own answer to them (Richtarik 1994, 120), and Paulin similarly drew his work
from Sir Richard Claverhouse Jebb’s nineteenth-century prose-translation of the original (Roche 1988, 225). Applying the term “translation” to these texts then may seem a dubious endeavour, but only if we fail to consider the political motivations of the authors. Friel certainly saw his work as a translation: the published version of Three Sisters is deliberately subtitled “A Translation of the Play by Anton Chekhov,” and the description on the back cover states that “Friel’s translation ... was undertaken ... since the only Chekhov translations available to the Irish theater at the time (1981) were American and English, in the hope that it might make the unique experience of Chekhov more accessible to Irish audiences” (my emphasis). Such a designation, then, makes this linguistic work into a political act aimed at legitimizing Hiberno-English as a mode of communication, and legitimizing its speakers as having a manner of expression and a culture which standard English alone cannot express. To translate from English into dialect is to eradicate the Britishisms which had previously made these canonical characters more distant, doubly foreign to an Irish audience, and instead to make them as familiar as Athena is to Jimmy Jack in Translations itself, by giving them recognizable local speech cadences. Indeed, Friel even calls attention to the language of his play, as when Kulygin, who in an attempt to revive his wife’s spirits has disguised himself as his school’s German instructor, replies to Natasha’s exclamation of shock by intoning with a German accent, “What means I put the heart across you?” (Three Sisters, 120). Such a comment works on many levels, serving to include an Irish audience which understands the saying while at the same time alerting non-Irish English-speaking audiences both to their own distance from the site of the play’s creation and to the need for outsiders to learn this particular idiom. Moreover, by drawing attention to his characters’ dialect, Friel highlights his own project; Natasha makes no such exclamation and Kulygin, no such comment, in Elisaveta Fen’s more traditional translation of the play (Chekhov 1959, 327).

Manoeuvring between English and dialect offers Field Day the power to subvert the status of English by asserting the distinction between English and Irish culture. As Annie Brisset argues concerning the similar relationship between Québécois and French, such “retranslation constitutes first and foremost a symbolic act of rupture, of declaring autonomy” in relation to the dominant language (1989, 21-22). The translator from English to Hiberno-English, after all, offers his belief in the inadequacy of the standard to express his own culture. Ultimately, however, translating from English can also subvert that claim to autonomy. By launching this challenge against the authority of British culture, the playwrights also attest to the impact of that authority in their own education and their own lives, revealing what Ashis Nandy has called the “unbreakable dyadic relationship” between colonizer and colonized (1983, 7), for on some level, going back
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to the English rather than the Russian or the Greek does not dissolve but rather reinscribes the connection between England and Ireland by arguing that the Russian culture which created Chekhov's plays and that country's potential ties to Ireland are not as important as the English culture which translated him in the first place. While the use of English source texts was in this case apparently a practical necessity, and in other historical circumstances might not bear such political weight, in a nation striving to forge an independent notion of itself, such dependence on the English can make Irish work appear doubly derivative.

Shaping Identities in Translation

Yet the endeavour still holds possibilities, and Friel felt that the mere fact of greater accessibility for a local audience, particularly in the case of a touring company such as Field Day, offered much promise. He described his decision to translate *Three Sisters* as one prompted by the ability of language to shape the people who speak it:

> Somehow the rhythms of these [standard English] versions do not match with the rhythms of our own speech patterns, and I think that they ought to, in some way. Even the most recent English translation again carries, of necessity, very strong English cadences and rhythms... [W]e are constantly overshadowed by the sound of the English language, as well as by the printed word. Maybe this does not inhibit us, but it forms us and shapes us in a way that is neither healthy nor valuable for us. (qtd. in Agnew 1980, 59)

Some might offer that the reverse is also true, and, for a company interested in reaching an international audience as well as a local one, dialect translations can alienate non-Irish speakers of English. Yet, as Bill Findlay has argued regarding the use of Scots on the stage, a national theatre culture "cannot function by looking over its shoulder for approbation from elsewhere... Scottish theater has an obligation towards its own audience" (1996, 205). Of course, not only the audience benefited from such an endeavour, and Rea has argued that one of the reasons for his involvement with Field Day was his feeling that "an Irishman in English theater is very conscious of belonging to a subculture rather than a culture proper... I felt less expressed in terms of England than I did over here" (qtd. in Gillespie 1980). Speaking to Ireland in its own cadences and rhythms seems to have sufficed for Friel, and his version of the play takes only scattered liberties with the text. Rather, Friel brings his Russia to life in Irish tones in an effort to reclaim what had previously been lost for Irish audiences: a clear sense of connection with the foreign text. It is highly ironic, then, that Friel's own distance from that original culture may have inhibited this endeavour.10
The most politically charged, and thus the most potentially disruptive, of these early translations was Paulin's *The Riot Act*, a play whose change in title already draws attention away from the central heroine of the Greek original and onto the wartime situation which condemns her. Indeed even the choice of a classical play is interesting considering both the central position such drama holds in the Western canon and the affinity *Translations* itself expresses for the “warm Mediterranean” (49) over neighbouring Britain's colder clime; while choosing to rewrite Greek drama allows a playwright to challenge the ideals of the canon, using Greece as a reference point also allows an author trained by the British system to draw upon a model which predates British dominance. In choosing *Antigone* as his source, Paulin selects a play whose situation closely mirrors the situation in the North; after all, his stage directions make it clear that the war which precedes the action stems from the inability of Eteocles to share power with Polynices, just as Northern Protestant leaders have often refused such arrangements with the Catholic minority, and the course of the drama itself reiterates the theme, as Creon argues that he will not “split [the] rule” that is his “by right” with “some king else” (39-40) while the version of the play Paulin draws from uses language that is far less defensive.  

Moreover, translating the play into dialect allowed Paulin to make a number of local associations that allow Greek tragedy to express his own sense of Northern Ireland. Many critics, for instance, have examined the language of Creon’s first speech and pronounced it typical of a Northern politician. Similarly, the use of dialect influences our perception of Antigone herself, who can be viewed here as a defiant icon of the suffering Irish nation, traditionally personified as female, who stands condemned by Creon, the representative of the male British state. Such associations in the text are primarily accomplished through language alone, for *The Riot Act* sticks very closely to the structure of the original play, and the first production’s modern costumes and draperied set hinted at, but did not clearly delineate, particular national affiliations (Richtarik 1994, 216). Visually, the play seemed to strive for profound abstraction with its precise choreography, its dark curtains and starkly lit stage, but by manipulating the way the characters sounded, Paulin was able to suggest a number of connections that would be familiar parts of the cultural vocabulary of a local audience.

Indeed, the play foregrounds language in a way that brings Paulin’s version into significant contrast with its source. While Jebb’s rendering of the chorus preceding Haemon’s entrance laments the tragic history of Antigone’s family, Paulin’s couches that history specifically in terms of language: “Ever since the day I first made this speech—it was in another time and place, and in a different language too—the grief I was speaking of then has grown and multiplied. It’s got more and more” (*The Riot Act*, 35).
Rather than offering a reflection on the inevitability of sorrow in a "house...shaken from heaven [where] the curse fails nevermore" (Jebb 1978, 130), Paulin's chorus laments its own sad history, one shaped, even defined, by a change in language, and the fact that the accumulation of sorrows is connected to the loss of a language gives the play perhaps its closest identification with the situation in Ireland.

Yet, as in Translations, Paulin is not entirely willing to look to the past as a moment of glory, for even the speech delivered in "a different language" presents a record of sorrow. Moreover, Paulin's Antigone is not entirely a traditional incarnation of the feminine icon of Irish nationalism. Rather, she becomes a particularly Northern figure, a unifying idealist whose allegiance is not monopolized by the brother she buries but is given equally to both. Certainly, this vision is part of the original already: when Creon challenges Antigone's loyalty to Polynices, the traitor, she argues that "death longs for the same rites for all" (Fagles 1982, 85). Paulin's play emphasizes Antigone's belief in the equality of her brothers as she asserts that even alive Eteocles would not criticize her actions: "That he'd never do... They were full brothers. They were equal" (29). The relevance of such a figure in the context of Northern Ireland was a point which Paulin had begun to argue some years earlier in response to the cultural critic Conor Cruise O'Brien's assertion that the situation in the North was already moving "backwards... away from the ceremonial act of non-violent disobedience, and into the fratricidal war, which precedes the action of the play," and in such circumstances "you begin to feel that Ismeme's commonsense and feeling for the living may be the more needful" response (1973, 159). Paulin vehemently disputed this claim in "The Making of a Loyalist," countering O'Brien's argument with the assertion that "the analogy between the play and events in the North of Ireland shows us a terrible truth—neither Ismeme, nor even Conor Cruise O'Brien, can prevent a civil war happening" (1984, 28). The rupture, according to Paulin, already exists in the past, and the job of the present is, like his Antigone, to find a way of burying the dead together. Originally published in 1980 in the Times Literary Supplement, Paulin's response represents the ferment which helped produce The Riot Act, and the essay proposes that to discredit Antigone is to side with the status quo, thereby absolving Creon/the state of any responsibility in the violence. That "The Making of a Loyalist" was republished the same year in which The Riot Act was produced, in a collection of essays dedicated to Brian Friel and Stephen Rea—the latter not only starred as Creon, but also directed the play—suggests that the production represented the fruition of Paulin's argument.

At the centre of The Riot Act stands the inevitable interconnecting of opposing sides. Even though Paulin's Creon heatedly asserts that the city is
his by right and that he alone can rule there, the play does not allow him to remain separate from the community he strives so desperately to stand above. The staging for the first production periodically had Creon blend into the chorus (Richtarik 1994, 216), thus subsuming him into the mass of the people. Furthermore, while his first speech is precise standard English, albeit riddled with political jargon, emotion and the momentary loss of his self-possession throw him into dialect. When the guard asks him if his account of events “sting[s his] ears or [his] conscience,” Creon dismisses him with the curt, “Why—Why should it? ... You’re a spieler only” (The Riot Act, 22), a shift of syntax and choice of words that indicates his connection to the same social world that produced the guard rather than preserving the strict class lines that separate them. In his closing speech, in the face of the loss of his family, Creon cannot muster the formal structures of the standard he employed earlier, and instead, in broken syntax, he calls himself “cack-handed ... Creon [who's] made a right blood mess” of things (62). At his lowest point, he, too, partakes in the sorrows the chorus lamented earlier, and his participation in that grief reveals itself in his means of self-expression. The use of dialect may, as Christopher Murray has argued, “flatten the play into ordinariness” at times (1991, 121), but in Creon’s case, that very ordinariness reveals his “Northernness,” his bond not only with Antigone but also with the rest of his city’s population.

Finding a Common Voice

While using dialect in an attempt to reshape the English language to fit the needs of a particular national community can enable a playwright to forge a deeper connection with that community and reinvent traditional texts to reflect on local events, dialect in itself is only a partial solution, precisely because of its regional specificity. Indeed, Hiberno-English itself varies over the island of Ireland, and it is highly ironic, given Friel’s goal, that in the Republic some reviewers of Three Sisters felt alienated by the production, which they claimed sounded too Northern to fit the South (Richtarik 1994, 126). What is dialectally familiar to one audience is dialectally distant from an audience whose English is not Hiberno-English (or even Derry Hiberno-English), so that while Friel undertook the Chekhov translation to ensure that his (Northern) Irish actors would not have to make the double adjustment of becoming English to become Russian, by familiarizing the characters for a local audience, he forces other audiences to make the double adjustment of becoming (Northern) Irish to become Russian. Irish identity, embodied in language, then, remains fractured as dialect itself becomes ever more local.

Yet in the medium of the theatre, this obstacle is not insurmountable, for performance itself provides a means of clarifying translation. Certainly
Translations itself uses this technique to inform George and Maire's romantic encounter, or even the play's many Greek and Latin passages, as these would be, on a literal level, incomprehensible to many, if not most, English speakers. High Time incorporates a good deal of performative translation—the youths' punk costumes, which help to rationalize Tom's antipathy for them; props like the eye-catching valentine Isabel surreptitiously sends to Val; and perhaps most vitally the mimed scenes the directors incorporated into the production—and one of Friel's more innovative additions to Chekhov's text, a dance that never quite blossoms, represents another such effective means of communicating the text's nuances.17 Similarly, the fact that The Riot Act appeared in a double bill with High Time, and that the roles of Creon/Tom and Antigone/Isabel were played by the same actors, allowed the performed texts to revise each other (Richtarik 1994, 234, 237), adding political dimensions to the latter play while offering in the conflict between Isabel and her stodgy guardian, Tom, a humorous parallel for the conflict of the Greek play. Gilbert and Tompkins propose that such doubling of actors creates metamorphic bodies which attest to the divided identity of the postcolonial subject (1996, 233). Yet such splitting is not always negative: if Antigone's troubles bring to mind the sorrows of the traditional nationalist embodiment of the nation as a woman, then her reappearance in the “second act” as Isabel, whose sharp mind and rejection of “feminine” restraint allow her to outwit her jailer/guardian, suggests that that same Irish nation need not necessarily succumb to a tragic fate. Revealing as the pairing of these plays is, however, neither of them succeeds quite as well alone. Individually, Paulin's, Mahon's and Friel's versions of foreign texts cannot quite bring linguistic and performative translation together for sustained effect, and thus the vision they seek to express, and the identity they seek to define, fail to materialize fully. As Paul Hadfield has proposed, Field Day is a theatre of ideas, but “the relationship between ‘ideas’ and the expression of these as ‘theatre’ was [not always] logical [or] simple” (1993, 48).

This is not to say that Field Day's early translations have somehow “failed” in their mission; for all its unevenness in other respects, The Riot Act offers a meaningful reflection on the formative power of language, and its pairing with High Time forces an audience to address questions which separate productions might submerge. And if Friel's Three Sisters is wordier and thus longer than necessary (Richtarik 1994, 122), the connection that its language allows an audience to make between the Prozorov family's unfulfilled yearning for Moscow and the paralysis of Joyce's Dubliners—after all, Irina does not simply have a revelation in Act One but rather “an epiphany” (Three Sisters, 16)—succeeds in bringing the Russian text into dialogue with the Irish tradition. It seems to me that these early efforts at translation have been a struggle against what finally tears the world of
Translations apart: silence—for in the play’s silences come actions which are inevitably violent, like the Donnelly twins’ abduction and probable murder of George. As Gilbert and Tompkins argue, silence is what defines the postcolonial subject—both in the silence of a tongue lost and in the refusal to speak the language of the conqueror (1996, 189-90). Yet, in Translations, neither Sarah’s retreat into a protective silence nor the ominous whistle that represents the Donnellys produces constructive meaning, and it is ultimately only speech, and the need to define the surrounding world through speech, that holds Baile Beag/Ballybeg together; indeed, the play’s great silent moments of defiance—Doalty’s assault on the soldiers’ machine, his implicitly threatening act of clearing a path to the road for George and the Donnelly twins’ violent attack—all happen offstage. Similarly, Field Day’s early translations, in their attempt to articulate the boundaries and potentialities of Northern speech, to find a “common voice” for themselves (Kearney 1988, 124-25), have sought to put this silence aside by interpreting language itself as political. If the identity which the language of these translations seeks to shape is itself still somewhat unfocussed, that circumstance only reflects the difficulty of understanding and communicating identity in the North. Brian Friel has argued that, “We are talking to ourselves as we must” (qtd. in Agnew 1980, 60). His “we” is ambiguous—the Irish? the directors? the North?—but the verbal emphasis of the comment stresses that whoever Friel’s “we” may be, they have the power, and the obligation, to turn speaking into an act of self-assertion, as opposed to the “ultimate protection of privacy” (Lojek 1994, 87) which silence represents, and to make the voice of the stage the means of perpetuating, and indeed creating, themselves.

Notes

1. Friel himself has stated that the play is not “about Irish peasants being suppressed by English sappers... The play has to do with language and only language” (qtd. in Kearney [1988], 127).

2. Michael Etherton (1989) argues that, based on the company’s list of productions, “one of Field Day’s commitments is to the development of Irish English,” 193. In his opinion, their productions indicate that language is central “to any profound political change,” 194.

3. Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins (1996) offer a similar argument regarding the status of the Maori language, which, “since even many Maori do not speak [it] well... can signify only ‘history’ to some audiences, and a superseded past at that,” 171.

4. Steiner offers that a civilization “in which the available resources of live perception and restatement wither... is imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches, or matches only at certain ritual, arbitrary points, the landscape of fact” (1975), 21.
Kearney (1988), 158-60, has gathered a list of specific connections between Friel's work and George Steiner's writing. Helen Lojek (1994), 83-99, also examines the relationship between Steiner's linguistic theories and Friel's work.


6. In discussing the layering of Irish identity, Zach (1988), 78, argues that "although Friel mainly attempts to sketch this divide in terms of language, he also implicitly comments on the present-day political and social situation in Northern Ireland." Edna Longley has in fact criticized Friel for this dimension of the play, stating, "No perspective discriminates between past and present, nineteenth-century Ireland and twentieth-century Northern Ireland. There is simply equation" (qtd. in Kearney [1988], 155). This assertion of "equation" is, however, problematic, and I would agree with Kearney's objections to Longley's remarks, as well as to others who criticize Friel for taking liberties with history: although the play concentrates a number of historical events into approximately two hours, as historical drama must do if it is to be "dramatic," and takes as its subject the oft-discussed topic of English colonization, in questioning myths of origin as it does, it forces the present to re-evaluate its assumptions about the past and thus to re-evaluate itself. As R.K.R. Thornton (1991), 224, has argued, "Of course the play is an attack on English influence in Ireland; but, more important, it is also a subversion of the Irish idea of the Irish."

7. See especially Loreto Todd (1989), ch. 2, 40. Also informative on characteristics of Irish-English/Hiberno-English is Liam Mac Mathúna (1990), 91-92, especially the discussion of Gaelic as a noun-centred language.

8. For a more detailed discussion of the board's reactions, see Richtarik (1994), ch. 6. Elizabeth Butler Cullingford (1996), 228, summarizes the general attitude toward Field Day thus: "Many commentators now associate Field Day with the 'green,' or nationalist, positions it has always tried to complicate through social and economic analysis. No matter how nuanced the company's productions, pamphlets, and public statements, the anticolonial positions of its directors ... logically require a politically united Ireland: a desirable ideal, but not one to which a unionist could subscribe."

9. Rudkin ranked at the rejection, but his ties with Field Day were not completely severed. Nine years later the company performed a staged reading of his 1973 radio play Cries from Casement as His Bones Are Brought to Dublin. See Hadfield (1993), 47.

10. Brisset (1989), 22, notes that translators from French into Québécois saw themselves, interestingly, as "discovering the 'truth' of the original work," which the French "had masked."

11. Jebb (1978), 134, in his translation, has Creon ask, "Am I to rule this land by other judgment than my own?... Is not the city held to be the ruler's?"


13. Christopher Murray (1991), 120, suggests that "the triangles, masonic symbols, [and] neo-classical architrave" which decorated the palace façade indicated to an audience that they were "in Belfast and Thebes simultaneously."

15. Although, as Worthen (1995), 28-29, argues, the play does distinguish between "Creon's smooth public discourse and the Guard's [more dialectically inflected] speech habits," the contrast is not so markedly maintained as this statement suggests, as Creon himself does not always make use of that "smooth public discourse."

16. Friel offered that Irish actors in traditional Chekhov productions "have to pretend, first of all that they're English and then that they're Russians. I'd like our audience to see Captains and Lieutenants who look as if they came from Finne r or Tullamore" (qtd. in Richtarik [1994], 120).

17. Directors Michael Long and Emil Wolk embellished the printed text significantly for the first production; some of these additions are briefly described in Richtarik's (1994), 234-35, discussion of the play. Similarly, her discussion of Three Sisters argues that reviewers found the insertion of the would-be dance scene to be one of Friel's few "genuine addition[s]" to Chekhov's work, 123.

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