

VIOLENCE AND THE IRISH PAST IN THE DRAMATIC WORKS OF BRIAN FRIEL

The link between violence and history, Irish history in particular, has become one of the central preoccupations of Brian Friel. Yet, it is worth remembering that Friel also explored other forms of violence, mainly psychological in some of his earlier plays. *Philadelphia*, *Here I Come !* (1) *Crystal and Fox* (2), *The Gentle Island* (3), and later *Living Quarters* (4) or *Faith Healer* (5) illustrate Friel's preoccupation with the pressures an individual or a community may have to sustain and the violence that may result from the breakdown of a no longer accepted authority or ethic code. But, given the political developments in Ulster, the word 'violence' came to take on more immediate and directly political implications in the heart and in the work of a writer who had consistently concerned himself with matters Irish.

For the purpose of this paper, we shall focus on the four plays which best outline Friel's growing concern with Irish history, his attempts at portraying violence and at taking into account the part it played in both past and contemporary events. It has often been noted that until 1973 and *The Freedom of the City* (6), Friel had remained outside of the political arena. His ability to portray the meanders of the Irish mind and to empathize with its frustrations and rebellions, not to mention his immense talent as a playwright, had already marked him out as a spokesman for many members of his generation. Following on the tragedy of Bloody Sunday, January 30th 1972, Friel adopted a stance which he has maintained so far, that of the *écrivain engagé*. Politics intruded violently into his life and into his work, demanding that he gave a voice to the grief and sense of outrage of his community, the Catholic, nationalist minority of Northern Ireland. *The Freedom of the City* is not only extremely powerful, it also occupies a central and unique position in Friel's work to date : never again did he confront and portray so directly the violence which was quickly taking hold of the province. A few years later, in 1975, *Volunteers* (7) - very much a transitional play - had its première in Dublin. Violence was still a dominant issue, but was not quite out in the open as had been the case with *The Freedom of the City*. The 'troubles', as they ironically came to be called, appear in counterpoint to the violent past events of Irish history. Political prisoners of today are made to reflect on the past that shaped them, and to reassess and question their own commitments in the light of an increasing awareness of the wider political and historical context. The superimposition of those two temporal levels - Modern Ireland and Viking Ireland - hints at the way Friel was beginning to conceive of today's predicament. Does a knowledge of the past enable one to understand the present ? Or do our present loyalties and prejudices condition or distort our reading of the past ? Underlying this difficult question is the dilemma facing most, if not all contemporary Northern Ireland writers ; is trying to understand the roots of the crisis a constructive, mind-enlarging venture, or does this process come dangerously close to excusing, or even condoning part of the on-going atrocities committed there daily in the name of a supposedly just cause ? How can one denounce or justify impartially or cool-headedly when so many tribal loyalties, as Seamus Heaney would put it, are at stake and determine attitudes to such an extent, often carrying with them set responses to generic situations, without any hope of ever bridging the gap. Heaney himself, in several poems, comes close to providing extenuating circumstances and sublimating

violence, or at least its causes, through mythology. Stewart Parker, in *Pentecost* (8), tried to show that blame and responsibilities cannot be shared arbitrarily, in a meaningless show of fair-mindedness, but that instead the root of violence and the power to destroy lie within the heart of each individual and depend on that person's acceptance of himself/herself and of others.

Interestingly enough, it was Field Day, Friel's theatre touring company which premiered *Pentecost* in Dublin in 1987 during the Theatre Festival. With *The Freedom of the City*, which was so coldly received by the London and Belfast critics, Friel had left himself open to attacks of propaganda and unfairness. With *Translations* (9) in 1980, he was now approaching the subject from a different angle, after having taken some distance from the burning issue of the Ulster crisis, even though the central preoccupations of the plays written in those intervening years could in some way be seen as related to that key issue : self-deception, betrayal, decadence, psychological violence, exacerbated passions and family feuds, not forgetting the powerful metaphor of the poisoned gift of the exiled artist, unable to heal his diseased and maimed compatriots, doomed to meet a violent end at their hands, on his return 'home' (10). At a time when other playwrights, like Graham Reid in particular, were portraying violence with terrifying immediacy, Friel chose to go back in history and set his next 'political' play, *Translations*, in 1833 in an effort to disentangle himself - and his audience - from the intricacies of the present dead-end situation. He persevered in this direction with *Making History* (11) in 1989, set at the time of the Battle of Kinsale, one of those momentous events in the almost mythical Irish past. Friel willingly acknowledges the fact that he is obsessed with history and when I had the opportunity of asking him why, he answered that he could not imagine how anybody living in Ireland could afford not to be. The weight of the past, already keenly felt in *Volunteers* and *Translations*, is fully manifest in *Making History*, Friel's most recent and most didactic play to date. It may not be as dramatically effective as its predecessors, but it is totally in keeping with the direction which Friel's preoccupations and activities have been taking in the Eighties. The statement it makes about the ambiguous relationship between story and history, between the often overlapping roles of the story-teller and of the historian, clarifies ideas and concerns which had been touched upon but not fully developed in the other 'political' plays already mentioned, as well as in *Living Quarters*, *Aristocrats* (12), and *Faith Healer*. As far as the question of violence is concerned, it could be argued that Friel never recaptured the same disturbing forcefulness after *Volunteers*. In his later plays, violence is more rampant, disguised, far less visible on stage than say in Reid's or Murphy's plays.

In a pamphlet entitled *Brian Friel : Crisis and Commitment. The Writer and Northern Ireland* (13), Ulick O'Connor explains :

I would like to examine the work of our one major writer who has consistently addressed himself to the root of the problem of contemporary Ireland and viewed the Northern Ireland situation against the background of colonialism - Brian Friel. (p. 7)

Few people in 1972, looking back at Friel's production so far - two collections of short-stories and seven plays - would have dreamed of calling Friel a committed writer or imagined he could undergo such a transformation virtually overnight. He was, beyond all doubt, an Irish writer insofar as he concerned himself

more specifically with 'typical Irish issues' : he had shown great psychological insight and was socially conscious, but as far as politics were concerned, Friel, the man, may have had firmly-held opinions, but Friel, the artist, remained amazingly allusive. To those who did not know about Friel's background and about his support for the Civil Rights Movement, *The Freedom of the City* must have come as a shock. As for those who had suspected him of being indifferent to the plight of the Catholic nationalist minority, they must have been relieved to see such a major writer entering the fray at last, and making such a powerful and controversial contribution to the 'cause'. On February 20th 1973, Friel's most controversial play had its première at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin. *The Freedom of the City* presents the events leading up to the death, or should we say the execution, of three protest marchers from Derry, Michael, Skinner and Lily, who, terrified by the heavy-handed intervention of the British Army to disperse the peaceful demonstration, had found refuge in the Mayor's parlour in the Guildhall. Those episodes are contrasted with scenes from the inquest during which the tribunal, helped by several witnesses, provides the "official" version of the events, since it is established right from the moment when the curtain goes up that the three have been killed and are lying dead on the stage. Several types of violence are explored in the play with a lucidity and technical mastery which reinforce its emotional appeal : first and foremost, there is the British Army resorting to force to break up an illegal but peaceful demonstration. And the soldiers of course are determined not to let the dangerous terrorists, who have invested the Guildhall, escape. Sharpshooters, lying in ambush, do not hesitate to fire at the three pathetic figures coming out to surrender. Skinner, the drop-out, the potential revolutionary of whom Michael the pacifist is so deeply mistrustful is perfectly aware of the fate that lies in store for them. Michael, the non-violent, may expect fair-play but Skinner knows that a high price will be exacted : 'Because you presumed, boy. Because this is theirs, boy, and your very presence here is a sacrilege.' (14) This premonition of the disproportionate violence which will be used to destroy them haunts Skinner. He is already a victim of another type of violence, as are Michael and Lily, insofar as the colonial situation has engendered a state of economic chaos in which discrimination, political and religious, is the rule. Their rebellion against the status quo is motivated not only by political factors, but also by economic and emotional ones. *The Freedom of the City* was badly received in Belfast and in London. In a way, this was perfectly normal : if Friel and the Catholic Nationalist Irish were so shocked by the behaviour of the British and reacted violently to Bloody Sunday, many Ulster Protestants and the majority of the English public opinion felt insulted, maligned and misunderstood. It is hard to tell how Friel felt about the reception of his play. What is beyond doubt is that it marked an important stage in his development as a playwright. Conscious that the direct portrayal of violence in *The Freedom of the City*, and the lack of distance from his subject matter (despite the use of certain distancing devices) had left him open to criticism on the grounds of propaganda, he went on in his next play, *Volunteers*, to tackle the same theme introducing a new perspective.

After looking at the present from the present, Friel, like Seamus Heaney in his collection of poems entitled *North* (15), made use of the interest aroused by the discovery of an archaeological site dating back from Viking times in Dublin, on Wood Quay to draw some parallels between today's situation in Ulster and Viking Ireland. A group of five political prisoners (also referred to by another protagonist as 'bloody criminals') have volunteered to work on an excavating site in the centre of an Irish town - Dublin ? Confronted with the past, with history, those actors or victims

of history will come to view themselves in a different light. What Keeney says in jest should be taken at face value :

the more we discover about our ancestors, children, the more we discover about ourselves - isn't that so ? So that what we are all engaged in here is really a thrilling voyage in *self* - discovery (p. 37)

Today's violence finds an echo in yesterday's dark ages, and the link between the two is symbolised and represented on stage by Leif, the skeleton found on the site, and by the beautiful jug painfully reconstituted by George, the site manager. The countless pieces of the jug, when all put together again, stand for a vision of the fragmented past, reconstructed and conceived of as a single entity, like the restored identity of a man, or better, of a nation. But the voluntary smashing of the reconstituted jug by the prisoner who best knew the value of this work of art foreshadows the disintegration and death that await the five men and also symbolises their refusal to accept a cosy reconstruction of history from which they would be excluded. But it is to the relationship between the men and Leif that Friel wants to draw our attention. Leif, as the voluntary or involuntary victim of violence. Each man will give his version of Leif's story, drawing on his own experience and beliefs. The question of what happened to him becomes absolutely central :

Keeney : What in the name of God happened to him ? D'you think now he could have done it to himself ? Eh ? Or maybe a case of unrequited love, George - what about that ? Or maybe he had a bad day at the dogs ? Or was the poor eejit just grabbed out of a crowd one sping morning and a noose tightened round his neck so that obeisance would be made to some silly god. or - and the alternative is even more fascinating, George - maybe the poor hoor considered it an honour to die - maybe he volunteered : Take this neck, this life, for the god or the cause or whatever. Of course acceptance of either hypothesis would indicate that he was - to coin a phrase - a victim of his society (p. 28).

It is the same Keeney, the quick-tongued, quick-witted joker who finds out what will befall them when they go back and reveals the secret of their imminent violent death at the hands of the other inmates. And all through the play he must carry the burden of that knowledge and he comes to realise the sickening absurdity of their situation, questioning the whole notion of involvement, cause and sacrifice, and the vicious circle of punishment and retaliation. Friel is not actually using the Viking material to mythologise the present, if anything, there is a strong sense of the desacralisation of sacrifice, both in today's context and in that of a thousand years ago ; despair is the prevalent sentiment. Looking back is no means of escape from contemporary reality, rather it should enable one to probe deeper and deeper in the hope of understanding the root of the problem. This dense and challenging work must be seen as a transitional play, a bridge between *The Freedom of the City*, with its focus set firmly on the present and *Translations*, in which Friel dived back into the past and decided to make History, and not mainly politics, his prime concern.

According to Friel, *Translations* started as a play about language. Since the language question in Ireland is so inextricably linked with the problem of the colonisation of the country, with the banning and demise of Gaelic and the imposition of English, it is obvious that, once again, Friel was venturing into another minefield. The colonial status of Ireland is an acknowledged fact in *Translations*. The year 1833 is a very pertinent choice, insofar as it allows Friel to

set the action in a hedge-school, vestige and product of the Penal Laws, at a time when the Gaelic language, under pressure, was beginning to be superseded, even in rural areas, by English, for which there was so much more demand. It is also the time when the English authorities embarked on the gigantic task of surveying the country, making new maps and anglicising the local place-names. Needless to say, what lay behind the Ordnance Survey was a military operation. Against a background of agrarian and imperial violence, it is the demise of a language and civilisation which is being highlighted. From the point of view of violence, Captain Lancey and the Donnelly twins are the key figures. On the one hand stands 'the perfect colonial servant', the man who will not hesitate to unleash the full power of the British Army to hunt down and punish those who are reponsible for the death of one of his men, whose big mistake it had been to think he could 'go native' and court one of the local girls. At the opposite end of the scale are the Donnelly twins. They never appear on stage, but every time their name is mentioned the tension grows and there is an ominous silence. With the arrival of the British soldiers, they are given a chance to expand their activities and become 'fully-fledged terrorists'. Violence breeds retaliation; in the case of Yolland, death, in the case of the other villagers, eviction. As in the Ancient World, the warlike empire imposes its supremacy over a beautiful, but dying civilisation. Great though the temptation may be for today's Irishmen to idealise and mythify their past, Friel remains cautious and shows us a world on the verge of collapse, not at all equipped to face the future, steeped in Greek and latin history pretending it can actually 'overlook' the existence of Britain. Nor does he shrink from representing the level of violence in that society, the arbitrary killings when rebels decide to take justice into their own hands. Words may too often serve to cover up a far from glorious reality or, as Synge put it in *The Playboy of the Western World*, there's a great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed (16).

Translations, though controversial, was unbelievably successful, it brought Friel praise and acclaim from most critics and immediately it became 'a classic' of contemporary Irish theatre. It may actually be made into a film very soon. Field Day, Friel's own Derry-based theatre and publishing company was off to a flying start. The historical and political dimensions had been skilfully blended with a dramatic plot, the appeal of individual characters and the whole had a cohesion that is typical of good theatre. Although no controversy greeted the first performances of *Translations*, it should nonetheless be understood that Friel was on very dangerous territory again. The version of history he had chosen to present in the play was not the 'objective reality', made of hard facts that most modern historians would try to establish: it was as much the result of Friel's conditioning as anything else, or so one could argue. His imagined vision of 1833 in Baile Beag depends on his understanding of and reaction to the Ulster crisis, and, no doubt, a Belfast Protestant would have portrayed things differently. But then again, Friel is no historian, he is a writer, attempting to convey through various metaphors the difficulty of establishing one's identity, as an individual or as a nation, and his own sense of loss and fragmentation.

In many ways, *Making History* is the logical sequel to *Translations*, even though eight years elapsed between the two and Friel wrote and adapted other plays in the meantime (17). Sometimes they are even too closely linked not to fuel unfavourable comparisons, as the latter play is not quite as good as the former and at times there are too many echoes and repetitions, as if Friel were now hammering out what he had successfully suggested earlier in a more subtle way. After showing his version of a historical process, the demise of the Gaelic language, he reflects on the

link between 'making' history, and writing about history. And as an illustration, he picks a key figure and a key event : Hugh O'Neill, the last of the great Gaels, and the Battle of Kinsale which marked the end of the Gaelic resistance in Ulster, the Flight of the Earls, and the triumph of Elizabethan England with the beginning of the plantations in Ulster. O'Neill, the scheming, crafty politician, the Gaelic chieftain married to Mabel, an Upstart but 'a very loyal wee girl', is one of those people who make history, make decisions that influence the course of events. On the other side is Lombard, half-archbishop, half-historian, who has decided to write a biography of his friend, the life and times of Hugh O'Neill.

These are violent times, and the Upstarts are both on the giving and on the receiving end of violence. Then war breaks out. Kinsale turns out to be a disaster, O'Neill's and O'Donnell's forces and Spanish allies are routed and eventually the two men leave Ireland. Mabel, symbolically has died in childbirth while her husband was hiding in the mountains, like a thief. A few years later, O'Neill and Lombard are in Rome, living in exile, a situation that has turned O'Neill into a bitter man, aware of his failure, and all the more determined to win his last battle over the writing of his biography. Now that history has been written, that the war has been lost, how is Lombard going to record and present those unpalatable facts ? Is he, as O'Neill suspects, going to do violence to what he regards as 'historical truth', something Lombard does not seem to believe in anyway

Lombard : I don't believe that a period of history - a given space of time - my life - your life - that it contains within it one 'true' interpretation just waiting to be mined. But I do believe that it may contain within it several possible narratives : the life of Hugh O'Neill can be told in many different ways. And those ways are determined by the needs and the demands and the expectations of different people and different eras (p. 16)

Lombard : Ireland is reduced as it has never been reduced before - we are talking about a colonized people on the brink of extinction. This isn't the times for a critical assessment of your 'ploys' and 'disgraces' and your 'betrayal' - that's the stuff of another history for another time. Now is the time for a hero. Now is the time for a heroic literature. So I'm offering Gaelic Ireland two things. I'm offering them this narrative that has the element of myth. And I'm offering them Hugh O'Neill as a national hero. A hero and the story of a hero. (p. 67)

With a few masterly strokes, Friel portrays the dilemma of the historian in Ireland, and across the world. What should his role, his function be ? In times of trouble do we look to history for reassurance about ourselves, to dream about a golden age that may, or may not have existed but that will give us back some sense of dignity, the imaginative and redeeming narrative, the act of *pietas* that Lombard so eloquently pleads for ? And what is Friel actually doing with O'Neill in this play ? Is he portraying him from a 'revisionist' point of view and showing the hard, unpalatable facts, or creating another myth, one that would be more suited to the needs of a modern day audience ? It remains to be seen what direction his work will now take. A new play is scheduled to open at the Abbey Theatre in April ; what will it be like ? A continuation or a new departure ? Will he come back to the present or carry on exploring the past ?

In *Celtic Revivals*, Seamus Deane, talking about *Translations* put forward an argument which may serve as a conclusion to this paper :

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In *Translations*, there are two Irelands, two languages, two kinds of violence [...] Ireland is, of course, a metaphor in these contexts as well as a place. It is the country of the young, of hope, a perfect coincidence between fact and desire. It is also the country of the disillusioned, where everything is permanently out of joint, violent, broken. [...] On the hither side of violence is Ireland as paradise ; on the nether side, Ireland as ruin. But, since we live on the nether side, we live in ruin and can only console ourselves with the desire for the paradise we briefly glimpse. The result is a discrepancy in our language ; words are askew, they are out of line with fact. Violence has fantasy and wordiness as one of its most persistent after-effects. (18)

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NOTES

- (1) Brian FRIEL : *Philadelphia, Here I Come !*, London, Faber & Faber, 1965
- (2) Brian FRIEL : *Crystal and Fox*, London, Faber & Faber, 1970.
- (3) Brian FRIEL : *The Gentle Island*, London, Davis Poynter, 1970.
- (4) Brian FRIEL : *Living Quarters*, London, Faber & Faber, 1978.
- (5) Brian FRIEL : *Faith Healer*, London, Faber & Faber, 1980.
- (6) Brian FRIEL : *The Freedom of the City*, London, Faber & Faber, 1974, In *Selected Plays*, London, Faber & Faber, 1984.
- (7) Brian FRIEL : *Volunteers*, London, Faber & Faber, 1979, Oldcastle, The Gallery Press, 1989.
- (8) Steward PARKER : *Pentecost*, in *Three Plays for Ireland*, Birmingham, Oberon Books, 1989.
- (9) Brian FRIEL : *Translations*, London, Faber & Faber, 1981.
- (10) In Friel's *Faith Healer*, Op. Cit.
- (11) Brian FRIEL : *Making History*, London, Faber & Faber, 1989.
- (12) Brian FRIEL : *Aristocrats*, Dublin, The Gallery Press, 1980.
- (13) Ulick O'CONNOR : Brian Friel : *Crisis and Commitment. The Writer and Northern Ireland*, Dublin, Elo Publications, 1989.
- (14) *The Freedom of the City*, in *Selected Plays*, Op. Cit. p. 140.
- (15) Seamus HEANEY, *North*, London, Faber & Faber, 1975.
- (16) J.M. SYNGE : *The Playboy of the Western World*, in *The Complete Plays*, London, Methuen, 1963, p. 227.
- (17) *The Three Sisters*, translated from Chekhov, Dublin, The Gallery, Press, 1981. *The Communication Cord*, London, Faber & Faber, 1981. *Fathers and Sons*, adapted from Turgeniev, London, Faber & Faber, 1988.
- (18) Seamus DEANE : *Celtic Revivals*, London, Faber & Faber, 1985, p. 170-171.