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The Freedom Of The City, or How Reality Contaminates Art

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The Northern Irish playwright Brian Friel (Omagh, 1929) wrote his first play in 1958 and his last play, to date, in 2008. That makes five decades dedicated to the stage, with no less than thirty plays. Occidental society has undergone deep changes in these fifty years, more dramatically so in Northern Ireland. The different tendencies in drama, the political and social circumstances in both nations – the Republic and the North – the evolution in the way of understanding family and religion, the different attitudes towards gender roles, have marked Friel's oeuvre and signalled him as a spokesman for a community that was a British colony at the beginning of the 20th century and finds itself negotiating the foundations that will definitely end up with the conflict derived from its de-colonization at the beginning of the 21st century. In Friel's career we find several plays that act as landmarks. As we will see, *The Freedom of the City* (1973) is Friel's first mature attempt to bring together his artistic vein and his commitment to the troubled nation he belongs to.

On January 30, 1972, fourteen civil rights marchers died as a direct consequence of the British army disbanding of a peaceful demonstration in Derry. The tragedy, which became internationally known as the "Bloody Sunday", was witnessed by Friel, who was then living in the city, and who, together with other Northern-Irish activists, had to observe impotently the farcical trial and subsequent report that exonerated the officers responsible for the killing. The experience resulted in his most overtly political play, which premiered at the Abbey Theatre in February 1973.

The Freedom of the City had originally been conceived as a play about poverty, entitled *John Butt's Bothy*, and inspired by the book *La Vida*,[1] by the American anthropologist Oscar Lewis. The play was meant to represent the evictions of the Irish peasants in the 18th century; nonetheless, after the traumatic experience of Bloody Sunday, it was transformed into a denunciation of the working methods of power.

The Culture of Poverty

The Freedom of the City begins with the corpses of three marchers: Skinner, Lily and Michael. They had been shot down by British soldiers after taking refuge in the Guildhall, in the aftermath of a civil rights' demonstration. The Guildhall was Derry's town council, a building that symbolized the Unionist power in this divided city. The audience is presented with different chronological lines: we follow the marchers' story after arriving dazed from the police tear gas and hiding in the building; their funeral and panegyrics made by the different representations of the establishment; the army judge's research on the events, and his conclusions accusing the three unarmed marchers of terrorism; and Mr Dodds' comments on the culture of poverty. This external character, an American sociologist, stands for Oscar Lewis – the author of *La Vida* – and whenever he explains any trait of the culture of poverty, it will be exemplified on stage by the three marchers.

The archetype of this culture of poverty is the forty-three-year-old cleaning woman, Lily, mother of eleven children, married to a disabled useless man, living in a tenement apartment with a toilet shared with other eight families. She is described by Mr Dodds thus:

> People with a culture of poverty are provincial and locally oriented and have very little sense of history. They know only their own troubles, their own neighbourhood, their own local conditions, their own way of life (...) Another inheritance is his inability to control impulse: he is present-time orientated ...[2] (111, 133)

Skinner, on the contrary, represents what Mr Dodds considers the evolution of this culture. This young man has no family, no job, no fixed home, however, he has developed a social conscience:

> But the very moment they acquire an objective view of their condition, once they become aware that their condition has counterparts elsewhere, from that moment they have broken out of their subculture, even though they may still be desperately poor (111).

This universalism evidences Friel's post-colonial concern, as the Northern-Irish problem is seen through the broader perspective of the countries that have suffered under colonialism, and as a consequence, its evolution has parallels in Africa, South America or Asia. It is not a coincidence that Skinner, mocking Michael, recites him Kipling's poem "If".

Skinner protects himself with a pose of frivolity except once, when in a dialogue with Lily he shows his class conscience:

> I'll tell you why you march (...) Because you live with eleven kids and a sick husband in two rooms that aren't fit for animals. Because you exist on a state subsistence that's about enough to keep you alive but too small to fire your guts. Because you know your children are caught in the same morass. Because for the first time in your life you grumbled and someone else grumbled and someone else, and you heard each other, and became aware that there were hundreds, thousands, millions of us all over the world, and in a vague groping way you were outraged. That's what it's all about, Lily. It has nothing to do with doctors and accountants and teachers and dignity and boy scout honour. It's about us – the poor – the majority – stirring in our sleep (154).

Through Skinner's words we hear the author, a playwright that had, until that moment, kept his political profile low. However, this character, like Friel, is afraid of being taken seriously. The author intends to create an artistic distance from the issue he is dealing with, and this distance is reflected in Skinner's antics.

Michael is the third example of this social class. He is educated, but has not acquired a class conscience; he represents the desire for prosperity, as his objective is to form part of the middle class. For the moment, although he is unemployed, he has already adopted the conservative values belonging to this class. We can recognize in this character the "mimic man" described by Naipaul, always imitating the forms of power, but without any chance of ever being part of it[3]. He has learnt by heart all the slogans used in the marches, and naïvely believes that the three of them can suffer no wrong, as reason is on their side; Skinner mocks this view:

> **MICHAEL:** And if they try to get you to make a statement you just say you're making no statement unless your solicitor's present.
> **SKINNER:** My solicitor's in Bermuda. Who's yours Lily? (157).

His *leitmotif*, as corresponds to the class he aspires to, is respectability:

> It was a good, disciplined, responsible march. And that's what we must show them – that we're responsible and respectable; and they'll come to respect what we're campaigning for. (...) Do you have the feeling they're not as – I don't know – as dignified as they used to be? (128, 129).

The ending of Mr Dodds's speech explains the reason for the death of these representatives of this social class in this particular place: they are the main victims in all conflicts because:

> They have, in fact, no future. They have only today. And if they fail to cope with today, the only certainty they have is death. (163)

The Widgery Report

The culture of poverty depicted in the play is no more than a consequence of the abuse exerted by power. Friel presents us with three different kinds of power, and demonstrates how their representatives manipulate the lives of these three characters, creating the fiction that suits their intentions.

First we find the official power, held here by the judge in charge of the investigation and the elaboration of the report. From the beginning his intention is to prove that everything – the march, the three marchers hiding in the Guildhall, their eventual execution at the hands of the British soldiers – had been a terrorist act. He presents only two possible alternatives: it has either been a long-planned terrorist act or the terrorists improvised the action on the very same day.

Both the police and the army officers accuse the victims of having opened fire as the only way to exculpate themselves, as they say, "there was no possibility whatever of effecting an arrest operation" (134). However, the judge goes further in his conclusions, affirming all through his statement that the three citizens involved were terrorists: "And had you known, as you learned later, Brigadier, that there were only three *terrorists* involved..." (134).

The play ends with the official report, a parody of the infamous Widgery Report drawn up after Bloody Sunday: first of all, the cause of the confrontation has to be found in the revolutionary speeches which inflamed the population and launched it against the security forces ("and had the speakers on the platform not incited the mob to such a fever that a clash between the security forces and the demonstrators was almost inevitable" (168)); and the conclusion, based on the police witnesses and the opinion of the experts, is that the three marchers killed at the Guildhall's entrance were armed, and two of them, Michael and Lily, fired; consequently, the only option available was the attack.

McGrath believes this play to be a response, not to the Bloody Sunday killings but to their aftermath, the Widgery Report:

> The four conclusions of Friel's Judge at the end of the play are either directly quoted or adapted from the eleven conclusions at the end of the *Widgery Report*. (...) Friel let the three victims in the Guildhall speak for the views of Derry citizens, who in the *Widgery Report* testified overwhelmingly that the Bloody Sunday victims were unarmed and that the military initiated the gunfire.[4]

However, not only the British army manipulates the facts at their own convenience, the media, represented by the Irish television, act likewise. The first broadcast speaks about a group of over fifty armed terrorists taking hold of the Guildhall. This is in not an innocent mistake, the result of believing the rumours in the street; the journalist works for the Republic, and, as he points out: "if the Guildhall, regarded by the minority as a symbol of the Unionist domination, has fallen into the hands of the terrorists, both the security forces and the Stormont government will be acutely embarrassed" (117, 118). In his next broadcast, the reporter abandons his triumphalist, vindictive tone to compose a moving picture of the funeral, with the presence of the whole Republican establishment, the Catholic Church in a prominent position, and an image of the Irish people united in their grief, transmitting the idea of the false harmony of a nation: with rich and poor, powerful and marginalized, all together in misfortune:

> the solemn requiem Mass, concelebrated by the four Northern bishops (...) And the clouds (...) can contain themselves no longer, and an icy rain is spilling down on all those thousands of mourners (...) There is the Cardinal Primate (...) And beside him I see Colonel Foley (...) the members of the hierarchy and the spiritual leaders of every order (...) And now the Taoiseach (...) Indeed I understand that the entire Dáil and Senate are here today (167, 168).

The reporter makes use of what the moderate Nationalist political class, whose values and slogans had been constantly repeated by Michael, wishes to present as their image in the civil rights movement: "I think that the word would be dignified" (168).

The Roman Catholic Church, through the priest who gives the two possible sermons at the funeral, carries out its own manipulation. In the first sermon, the social question has not been mentioned yet in the conversation among Skinner, Michael and Lily, so they can be depicted as martyrs for the Catholic cause: "They died for their beliefs. They died for their fellow citizens. They died because they could endure no longer the injures and injustices and indignities" (125). However, there is a second possible sermon, in which there is a shift made to avoid any kind of identification between the Church and any revolutionary movement. This sermon is given in the play after the audience witnesses Skinner's real motivation, and his ideology provokes the Church's warning. The sermon is exactly the same as the first one until the priest comes to the question "Why did they die?" From that moment on, the characters are no longer heroes, but dangerous communists: "but they have one purpose and one

purpose only – to deliver this Christian country into the dark dungeons of Godless communism" (156).

Friel's target is also the Irish nationalists, whom we see manipulating the facts through the figure of the Balladeer. He has two possible performances as well. In the first one he is in a celebrating mood: drunk and accompanied by a musician, he sings an epic hymn to glorify these brave heroes who have seized the Guildhall. Making use of all the nationalist clichés, he composes a story about "A hundred Irish heroes", and ends up with cheers for "Ireland one and free" to celebrate the victory (118, 119). When the Balladeer starts the second act, he is still drunk, but now he is in mourning. In this second song he praises the courage of the "three Derry volunteers", including more clichés: "The Saxon bullet", "they wanted Mother Ireland free", "Who gave their lives for their ideal", "England's victims"; and his ironical ending, in line with his version of the three activists for the nationalist cause: "We have their memory still to guide us; we have their courage to recall" (148).

Conclusion

In *The Freedom of the City* the author is trying to solve an everlasting dilemma: how does an artist denounce an unfair reality while producing at the same time an artistic artefact? Following Brecht, Friel attempts to create an artistic distance from the issues he presents by using new forms of expression to neutralize his personal involvement in the facts. The main artifice we find here is the juxtaposition of many story lines: while the audience sees how Skinner, Lily and Michael evolve on the stage, their world is perceived as "real", and, having the kaleidoscopic views of the representatives of the different stances of power almost simultaneously, we witness the gradual distortion of that reality, the creation of parallel versions of reality. Finally, Mr Dodds's interventions provide the theoretical substratum that enables the spectator to see these characters with enough distance to understand them and extrapolate their experience to the poor class worldwide, showing how what happened in Derry could have taken place anywhere in the world, as it is a mere example of how power always crushes the weakest.

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Notes

1. Lewis, O. *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty – San Juan and New York*. New York, 1966.
2. All quotations for the play are taken from: Friel, B. *Plays One*. London, 1996. All subsequent quotes will be identified by page

numbers from this edition between brackets in the text.

3. *The Mimic Men*: “We pretend to be real, to be learning, to be preparing ourselves for life, we mimic men of the New World (...) with all its reminders of the corruption that came so quickly to the new”. (Quoted in Bhabha, 2002: 88).
4. McGrath, 1999: 106.

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