

*The Playwright's Response to the
Colonial Process: Innovatory
Dramatic Structure In Brian Friel's The
Freedom of the City (1973)
and David Rudkin's
The Saxon Shore (1986)*

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*Abstract: This article compares the dramatic structure used by Brian Friel and David Rudkin in *The Freedom of the City* and *The Saxon Shore* respectively. It is argued that each playwright employs innovatory techniques in order to underline his particular response to the colonial process in Northern Ireland. Brian Friel uses techniques of disorientation and displacement aimed at placing the theatre audience in the situation of the colonised. On the other hand, David Rudkin reinforces the central metaphor of his play, *Hadrian's Wall* at the very time of the Roman withdrawal from Britain, with the doubling of roles in such a way as to demonstrate not only the fundamental similarities between individuals in apparently opposing groups, but also, consequently, the vulnerability of the coloniser's position.*

*And I moved on, to learn
One of the million histories,
One weather, one dialect
Of herbs, one habitat
After migration, displacement,
With greedy lore to pounce
On a place and possess it,
With the mind's weapons, words,
While between land and water
Yellow vultures, mewing,
Looped empty air
Once filled with the hundred names
Of the nameless, or swooped
To the rocks, for carrion.*

...

*And I smell hot thyme
That grows in another country,
Through gaps in the Roman wall
A cold wind carries it here.*

...
*Through gaps in the mind,
Its fortifications, names:
Name that a Roman gave
To a camp on the moor
Where a sheep's jawbone lies
And buzzards, mewing, loop
Air between woods and water
Long empty of his gods . . .*¹

Michael Hamburger

In "Travelling" the German-born British poet Michael Hamburger reflects on the power of language as a weapon of domination in the hands of a colonising culture, however the poem's central symbol, the ruins of Hadrian's Wall, serves as a reminder of the vulnerability not only of the colonised but of the very coloniser. This article examines two plays which consider, in very different ways, the complexity of this relationship. One of the most striking characteristics of the colonial process is the overlaying of the ruling power's culture upon that of the dominated people. This superimposition may take many forms – linguistic, religious, political, administrative, economic – but its objective is always the same, to strip the indigenous inhabitants of their identity and cast them into a limbo where they are denied their roots in the old world and status in the new. Reality itself is redefined along ethnocentric lines, and the very notions of truth and falsity become dependent upon the standpoint of the viewer. From the metropolitan point of view, this homogenising process brings the advantages of administrative efficiency and the sense of psychological well-being satirised by John Boorman in his film *Hope and Glory* (1987) in the scene where an English schoolteacher quizzes her pupils on the significance of "the pink bits" on the world map. However, for the colonised, the sensation is the opposite – disorientation, confusion and a rapidly diminishing sense of self-esteem. It is precisely these aspects of the colonial situation in Northern Ireland which serve as the focus for two apparently very dissimilar plays: Brian Friel's *The Freedom of the City* (1973) and David Rudkin's *The Saxon Shore* (1986).

Born within seven years of each other in the period immediately after the creation of the Irish Free State, each playwright has his own personal perspective on the cultural disorientation inherent within the Irish colonial situation. Brian Friel was born in Omagh in 1929 and educated both there and in Derry, thus obtaining first-hand experience of the rigours of being a Catholic in Northern Ireland. From a geographical and historical point of view Derry really ought to be the capital of Donegal and is therefore cut off from its own roots. Since Friel himself spent his holidays in Donegal and his schooldays in Derry he has a particularly acute sense of the implications of this separation, his regular border crossings also serving to develop in him the fascination with shifting perspectives which characterises so many of his plays. David Rudkin, on the other hand, has a more intimate knowledge of the metropolitan perspective since he was born in London and educated at King Edward's Grammar School, Birmingham, and St Catherine's College, Oxford. His Anglo-Irish parentage affords him a more dispassionate view of the ambivalence at work within Northern Ireland, and his position as an outsider is compounded by his bisexuality, something which

undoubtedly serves to inform Athdark's sense of perplexity about his own identity in *The Saxon Shore*. Ironically, it is precisely Rudkin's capacity to comprehend both sides of the question which led to the play being first staged in London rather than in Derry (although the play had been commissioned by the Field Day Theatre Company they rejected it upon completion due to their difficulty in accepting its sympathetic portrait of the Scottish Puritan community in Northern Ireland).

In *The Freedom of the City*² Brian Friel is dealing with the most violent manifestations of the colonial process in the recent history of Northern Ireland, the notorious events of the day which has come to be known as Bloody Sunday. As Elmer Andrews points out in his essay, "The Fifth Province," the episode:

. . . quickly and deeply embedded itself in the ideology of republicanism, assuming the status of a mythic reiteration of earlier sacred foundational acts (in, say, 1798 and 1916), the recollection of which serves the purpose of integrating and justifying republican consciousness.³

However, Friel's concern is not to contribute to what Andrews describes as "the common fund of hallowed traditions, orthodox pieties and idealised self-images whereby one particular social group maintains its sense of identity." Friel is seeking, on the contrary, to alert against the process of myth-making and to demonstrate how the same events can be appropriated by opposing groups and transformed to serve their own ends. He describes the way in which both colonised and coloniser participate in the deconstruction and redefinition of reality, and he uses a series of disorientation techniques or displacement strategies so that the very structure of the play places the theatre audience in a situation of perplexity analogous to that experienced by the victims of the process. The notion of being trapped in an endlessly repeated cycle of events, for example, is suggested by the fact that the play's opening image, that of three bodies lying "grotesquely" across the front of the stage, is immediately posterior, in a historical sense, to the closing moments of the play, when we see the same three individuals caught in a glare of spotlights as they are gunned down by the British Army with their hands above their heads.

The action of the play takes place in the Mayor's parlour in Derry's Guildhall, in which three civil rights demonstrators have sought refuge after their march has been broken up. Intercut with the main action are scenes from the official inquiry into their killings (conducted by an English judge), the academic descriptions of the nature of poverty given by an American sociology professor, the version of events sung by a balladeer and a chorus of children, the comments of a priest celebrating a requiem mass for the victims, the official version of events given by an Army press officer, the commentary of a television journalist observing the events, and the account given posthumously by the three victims themselves. The major part of the play's action, however, shows us the events within the Mayor's parlour, from the time the three demonstrators arrive to the time they leave, just moments before their deaths.

One of the principal effects of the multiple points of perspective offered by the playwright is the creation of a gap between the real events and their representation by the bystanders. What we see is the process of myth-making at work, a process which takes as many forms as there are points of view. At one extreme we see the English judge constructing the official version of the incident, steadfastly rejecting all testimony to the effect that the three victims were unarmed at the time of their deaths. At the other we hear the voices of

three members of the public, excitedly relating an exaggerated view of events based purely upon hearsay, in which estimates of the number of people occupying the Guildhall rise rapidly from "at least a dozen" to "maybe twenty." This is immediately followed by the official statement of the Army press officer that "up to forty persons are involved." In the version sung by the drunken balladeer "a hundred Irish heroes" took over the Guildhall.

What becomes clear is that each observer is appropriating the events for his own purposes. The Judge is seeking to justify the action of the armed forces and to use the deaths as an object lesson for the civil rights movement as a whole. The Priest sees the dead as victims of a communist plot and holds them up as a warning to those "flirting with the doctrines of revolution." Such manipulation of the events stands in stark contrast to the reality that is observed by the theatre audience, which is able to see that "the deceased" are neither "heroes" nor "victims of a conspiracy" but in fact three individuals with markedly different reasons for being on the civil rights march in the first place.

Michael, for example, declares that he is campaigning for the "justice and fair play" that every man is entitled to. Lily, the hard-pressed mother of eleven children, admits that she was marching for her Down's syndrome son, Declan, while the anarchist Skinner describes the civil rights movement as being "about us - the poor - the majority - stirring in our sleep." Since each of the three central characters reformulates his/her position on numerous occasions, Lily first of all declaring that she goes on the marches for the exercise, for example, Brian Friel effectively sets the complexity of individual action against the two-dimensional simplicity of that action as represented in the doctrinaire propaganda of the State, the Church and the Press. The employment of characterisation drawn from two radically different theatre traditions, the comic realism of the central characters as against the expressionism of the symbolic characters, mere mouthpieces, is one of the principal disorientation strategies utilised by Friel in the play. The caricatures struggle throughout the play to categorise the fully rounded characters we see in the inner play, trying to reduce them to the stereotypes they themselves are. The suppression of the private citizen's individuality by a faceless and remote colonial power is fundamental to the process of colonialism. Elmer Andrews sees *The Freedom of the City* as the portrait of a world in which:

. . . the dialectic between private and public has broken down completely. The meanings produced in the public domain proliferate in violent disregard of the private reality which alone can justify them. . . ⁴

The breakdown in relations between individual and institution, between private and public, lies at the very heart of the play. The action takes place within the heavy, staid atmosphere of the Mayor's oak-panelled parlour, his inner sanctum, which, as the Union Jack beside the door testifies, is also the symbolic seat of the British presence in this Northern Irish city. The three central characters find their way into this space, blinded by CS gas, retching, gasping for breath and soaked by water cannon. As they begin to recover, their individual reactions to this unexpected refuge point up the falsity in the official version of events, which classes the three of them as representatives of a single movement - although they do have the shared status of each being displaced or dispossessed individuals. Skinner's "volatile mind" is quick to grasp the symbolic significance of their presence as members of the down-trodden minority in the nerve-centre of the Imperial power. It is he who finds the Mayor's ceremonial robes and initiates the theatrical aping of the masters by their slaves. It is he who ironically bestows the "freedom of the city" on his two companions, and it is he

who symbolically makes his protest by stubbing out his cigar on the Mayor's leather-topped conference table and by stabbing the portrait of a forgotten dignitary with the Mayor's ceremonial sword. Lily, initially overwhelmed by the conspicuous signs of wealth, takes the opportunity to enjoy the experiences hitherto denied to her, drinking sherry and making phone calls to her neighbours and relatives. Michael, on the other hand, urges respect for the institution as represented by its trappings.

What we have is a brief image of the colonised enjoying the benefits of the coloniser. For the duration of the play the three chance companions enjoy the fantastic and ephemeral illusion of freedom. As the woman's voice tells them during the demonstration, "This is your city!" and, as the Priest says in his funeral address, like the blessed meek they have possessed their own land. The irony which underlies the whole play, of course, is that, as far as the theatre audience is concerned, they are already dead, a fact which the play's dramatic structure never allows us to forget. The parallelism of events drawn from two separate time sequences being presented concomitantly in stage-time reminds us constantly that the fully rounded characters we see before us are in fact ghosts, another of Friel's displacement strategies.

If Brian Friel's techniques of disorientation and displacement seek to place the theatre audience, in a certain sense, in the place of the colonised, David Rudkin obliges his audience to go beyond empathy and engage in a reconstruction of the dichotomous relationship between coloniser and colonised. In *The Saxon Shore* the audience is invited to recognise that the two sides may even be forged from the same raw material. The basic dramatic structure which Rudkin employs to embody this theme is one which, at first sight, could scarcely be called innovatory since it is a technique which may be as old as the theatre itself. However, where 'doubling' is traditionally used in cases of practical or financial necessity and, moreover, tends to be a producer's tool rather than a writer's one, Rudkin makes extremely conscious use of the strategy in order to enhance the linear structure of his play.

The Saxon Shore is as metaphorical as *The Freedom of the City* is literal. Whilst there can be no doubt that a play set in Derry City on 10th February, 1970, is about Northern Ireland, Rudkin's decision to set his play near Hadrian's Wall in the year 410 AD does at least allow the possibility of other interpretations. The play ostensibly deals with the experience of three communities at the time of the fall of the Roman Empire: the Celts, the Romans and the Saxons. However, the metaphorical links to the situation in Northern Ireland are inescapable, and Hadrian's Wall clearly symbolises both the Northern Irish border with Eire and also those barriers which impede Catholics from gaining access to positions of power within Northern Ireland itself.

What is most powerful in the play's writing, however, is its evocation of the three communities through the way they each use English. In fact, of course, what is perceived by the theatre audience as a common language is actually a dramatic representation of the communities' three separate languages. In the same way that the three groups share a common landscape but are divided by their attitude to that landscape so, from the audience's point of view at least, they are divided by a common language. In this sense the audience is placed in a privileged position in being able to perceive the potential for unity between the three communities, whereas those involved in the story can only see the justification for separation and antagonism.

Although the play deals with the traumatic clash between cultures Rudkin's central structuring device, that of actors doubling rôles from two or more of the three communities, emphasises the fact that each of these communities is composed of individuals who are

essentially similar. The significance of this idea is compounded by the fact that the Werewolves in the play are themselves drawn from both the Roman and Saxon communities. Rudkin has thus created a metaphor for the terrorist mentality which looks back to Roman myths explaining the 'barbaric' nature of the Huns, and to the Saxons' own hysterical reaction to the terror and insecurity of the world around them. What the Romans and Saxons most fear is simply their own alter-ego, that which is latent within themselves. When Athdark returns home with Widow Flax's goat, killed by his own Werewolf self, he remembers that he is "man outward, wolf inside" and says, "I must hide somewhere, and think on what I am . . ."

Just as man and werewolf are shown to be one and the same, so other apparently clearly distinct groups are revealed as being mere constructs. The Saxons in the play do not know if they are British, Roman, Saxon, or any two or all three. When Athdark awakes with his wound healed he sees the Celtic princess, Ceiriad, and thinks himself in Paradise. Later, when he is taken to Dinas Maros and his blindfold is removed he is convinced that he is in the "Shining City" of Jerusalem, until the smell of burning peat (the metaphorical representation of the incense used in Catholic church services) transforms his amazed love and reawakens his doctrinaire hatred. When Agricola reads the Roman Emperor's letter justifying the necessity of withdrawing the Roman troops to the mainland Agnes expresses her sense of disillusionment in terms of a loss of identity:

Take everything away from a folk? Land? Roots? All our belonging? . . . Not even a name. British, and not. Saxon, and not. Roman, and not. Who shall we say that we are now? ⁵

Similarly, the differences between man and animal, man and woman and even, as Sulgwen points out to Ceiriad, between any two men, are shown to be arbitrary constructs. The metaphorical significance of this idea is directly related to the polarisation of the Catholic and Protestant communities in Northern Ireland. In his essay "Nationalism: Irony and Commitment" Terry Eagleton expresses the idea in these terms:

If the binary opposition between 'man' and 'woman' can always be deconstructed – if each term can always be shown to inhere parasitically within the other – then just the same is true of the opposition between those other virulently metaphysical forms of identity, Catholic and Protestant. Catholic, of course, means universal; so there is something curious in using it to define a particular kind of national identity. There is a good Joycean irony involved in establishing one's Irish identity by reference to a European capital. ⁶

It is precisely this irony, perhaps the most polemical aspect of the colonial situation in Northern Ireland, that David Rudkin is exposing and analysing in *The Saxon Shore*.

It is too much of a simplification to conclude by saying that *The Freedom of the City* is pessimistic whereas *The Saxon Shore* is optimistic; both plays are too richly ambivalent for that. However, the final image of a play is often what remains longest in a theatre audience's recollection, and there can be no mistaking the intention of the playwrights in closing their plays respectively with the images of three unarmed members of the public being gunned down by a colonial army and of a newly free man resolving to turn his sword into a spade as he assumes the stance of a man rather than an animal. But perhaps a better

guide to understanding each author's attitude to the colonial process is the dramatic structure of their plays: Brian Friel's techniques of disorientation and displacement are as analytic as David Rudkin's reconstruction is synthetic. Richard Allen Cave places *The Saxon Shore* amongst the best Irish plays written since Independence, "plays of impotence, self-inflicted violence and loss, conceived out of the agony of dispossession."⁷ However, although Rudkin certainly does not deny what Cave describes as "the trauma of the colonial experience in Ireland," he also emphasises the potential for growth out of that experience. In his Introduction to *Ashes* (1974), Rudkin writes:

Talk about this play's 'problematic' or 'unorthodox' structure is superficial and foolish. Any play I write is an organism, its shape inwardly determined by its own inner moral necessity.⁸

'Organic,' with all its implications of integration and the potential for growth, is the word which best describes the unity between the dramatic structure and the underlying philosophy of *The Saxon Shore*. Whereas Brian Friel focuses upon the barbaric brutality of the colonial process, for David Rudkin, as for Michael Hamburger, the isolated ruins of Hadrian's Wall are a powerful reminder that empires crumble, and that, though he may leave his language behind him, the coloniser eventually returns home.

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