

**THE CARNIVALESQUE IN BRIAN FRIEL'S  
*THE FREEDOM OF THE CITY***

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The critical consensus about *The Freedom of the City*, written in response to Bloody Sunday and the Widgery Report, is that it marks a turning-point in Friel's dramatic output, the point at which the crisis of Northern Ireland led him to begin including the historical and political dimensions more explicitly in his work (Deane 1984, 16-17; Maxwell 1984, 206; Etherton 1989, 165-66; O'Brien 1989, 75-77; Pine 1990, 101-19; Peacock 1993, xi-xii). As is well known, the play's *story*, the Formalist *fabula* or chronological sequence of events, takes on a 'disturbed' shape in the actual *text* (the Formalist *sujet*). After the opening image of the three dead bodies of Skinner, Lily and Michael lying across the front of the stage, the text becomes dislocated as it moves in two opposite directions. On the one hand, it travels in a flashback to the moment when Skinner, Lily and Michael meet and take shelter in the Guildhall of Derry City. On the other, it is projected forward to a presentation of various reactions to the death of the three, including above all the proceedings of the tribunal of inquiry.

The formal rupture between these two planes is reinforced by the utterly distinct modes of characterization employed in each (Andrews 1992, 35; Aragay 1993, 13; Birker 1984, 153-54). While the Guildhall scenes involving Skinner, Lily and Michael are constructed in naturalistic terms, the other plane is made up of a series of non-naturalistic episodes in which a number of 'voices' are heard attempting to appropriate events from a variety of ideological perspectives. The former are presented as the 'real' facts to which the audience is given privileged, 'unmediated' access—that is, the naturalistic mode seeks to elide the author's mediation, a point to which I shall return. The audience's sympathy and emotional involvement are undoubtedly sought for in the Guildhall scenes, in which Friel builds three memorable, highly individualized, psychologically 'rounded' figures complete with motivations, feelings, memories, distinctive idiolects—all the features of the conventional makeup of the naturalistic character which tend to blur the distinction between actor and role and position the audience to engage in a comparable act of emotional identification with the fictional persona (Aston and Savona 1991, 35-35; 46). In contrast, there are no 'characters' in the naturalistic sense of the term in the other plane of *The Freedom of the City*, but a series of disembodied 'voices' which articulate, above all, the discourses that

most powerfully interpellated the Catholic community in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s: the (British) state (English judge), republican nationalism (the balladeer) and the Catholic Church (the priest). Such ‘voices’ obviously lack the individualizing, sympathy-arousing features present in the depiction of Skinner, Lily and Michael. Because of the alternation of the two planes throughout the play, the audience is jolted back and forth between sympathy and emotional identification on the one hand and critical detachment on the other.<sup>1</sup> The text’s dislocation is thus arguably transferred to the audience, who are required by the play to measure the angle of deviation of each ‘voice’ or discourse by comparing it to the ‘facts’ as depicted in the Guildhall scenes, as well as to reflect on the forces (social, political, religious, historical) that determine the triumph of one or another of those discourses, that is, their being accepted as the truth by various institutional bodies and socio-political groupings.

Thus *The Freedom of the City* does not, in a postmodernist way, collapse the distinction between reality, facts, the truth, and the discourses constructed about it. On the contrary, it dramatizes the discrepancy between those two planes, and in this respect it offers itself, and has been interpreted as, a critical diagnosis of the Northern Irish situation in the early 1970s: the play presents the distance between the two planes as unbridgeable, a sign that it sees the core of the ‘Troubles’ in the inability of the parts to communicate and share an agreed history, which will only become possible when the plight of the common people ceases to be ignored and concealed under ideological abstractions (Fitzgibbon 1991, 55). This paper sets out to qualify the play’s critical stance by addressing two questions: how is the above-mentioned discrepancy characterized in the play? And: what is the nature of that which the audience is led to sympathize with? Some light may be thrown on such questions by reference to Mikhail Bakhtin’s conceptualization in *Rabelais and His World* of the opposition between official and non-official, popular, carnivalesque culture.

As Bakhtin defines it, carnival is both the historically specific early modern celebration centring on Mardi Gras, and an immaterial, “indestructible” (Bakhtin 1984, 33) force, the carnivalesque spirit, which has admittedly become “narrowed down” since the Renaissance as a result of the rise of bourgeois culture, but which still surfaces on certain festive occasions (Bakhtin 1984, 276; see also Holquist 1990, 89). Official culture, according to Bakhtin, is made up of the monologic discourses of institutions and political groupings which sanction the existing pattern of things by using the past in order to legitimize the present and seek to impose their version of events as the “eternal and indisputable” truth (Bakhtin 1984, 9), as a fixed, static, unified text. Official culture attempts to “fill conceptual space completely” (Clark and Holquist 1984, 308-9), in the felicitous phrase of the two critics who have contributed most to raising Bakhtin’s reputation in the West over the past decade. The carnivalesque undermines such “epistemological megalomania” (Clark and Holquist 1984, 309); it introduces a spirit of relativity by highlighting the gaps and fissures in the discourses of official culture, and it does so from its liminal, marginal position: carnival offers an “extrapolitical aspect of the world ... a second world and a second life outside officialdom”, it is “the second life of the people, who for a time [enter] the utopian realm of community, freedom and abundance” (Bakhtin 1984, 6; 9). It is also a “temporary liberation ... from the established order ... the feast of becoming, change, and renewal ... [of] purely human relations” (Bakhtin 1984, 10). The carnivalesque spirit features a heightened sense of collectivity, of sharing, and of equality; it engenders festive laughter, which is directed at everyone, including the

carnival's participants, and is highly ambivalent, both gay and triumphant but also mocking and deriding (Bakhtin 1984, 11); it enables a special type of communication, simultaneously characterized by the use of abusive, profane or indecent language, by its philosophical, utopian depth, and by its openness and frankness (Bakhtin 1984, 10; 16); it has its own logic of the 'inside out', of misrule, reversal, parody, travesty, of comic crownings and uncrownings (Bakhtin 1984, 11); it is "an 'island' in the sea of history" (Clark and Holquist 1984, 301), a release from official time into a unique sense of the continuity of the common people throughout time, a sense that is inseparable from Bakhtin's notion of the "grotesque" body (Bakhtin 1984, 18-19). The grotesque body is earthy, it is one with the material world and with others, fertile, abundant, constantly transgressing its own limits, as evidenced in its various orifices, constantly dying and renewing itself, constantly becoming. Bakhtin sets up a contrast between the carnivalesque, grotesque body and what he terms the "bourgeois ego" (1984, 19), the individualized, atomized subject, with a closed-off body and an isolated psyche, which has become dominant in Western culture since the Renaissance. The main function of carnivalesque laughter is, in fact, a positive one, namely, to "degrade, bring down to earth, turn [its] subject into flesh" (Bakhtin 1984, 20), to materialize that which is abstract, to bring that which is high down to the level of the carnivalesque body. Carnival is, finally, a victory over the fear engendered by official culture, a bulwark against repression (Bakhtin 1984, 47).

The spatial metaphors used by both Bakhtin and Clark and Holquist in order to define the centrality of official culture (it "attempts to fill conceptual space completely") and the liminality of carnival (it is "outside officialdom") are clearly pertinent to Friel's strategy in *The Freedom of the City*. The English judge, who voices the discourse of state power with the institutional force necessary to pass itself off as the truth, is shown attempting to fill space completely: in stage terms, by always making his appearance on the battlements above the Guildhall where Skinner, Lily and Michael are; conceptually, by both opening and closing the play, thus 'containing' events both literally and metaphorically –significantly, at the start the Judge defines the nature of the tribunal he presides over and sets limits to the kinds of discourse it is willing to take into consideration (Friel 1984, 109-110). The play's strategy of reversal consists in (a) making the marginal central by placing the three Bogsiders, Skinner, Lily and Michael, inside the Guildhall, in the mayor's parlour, which takes up almost the entire stage (Friel 1984, 104),<sup>2</sup> and (b) undermining the "epistemological megalomania" of the monologic discourses of officialdom voiced by the judge, the republican balladeer and the priest by depicting them as being locked in myths and abstractions which have nothing to do with the 'real' plight of the common people.

In addition, the naturalistically-portrayed common people, whom the play requires the audience to sympathize with, are actually mediated to us by the author in a way that closely parallels Bakhtin's characterization of popular carnivalesque culture. Inside the mayor's parlour the audience witnesses the emergence of a community of "purely human relations" (Bakhtin 1984, 10) that is gradually formed between Skinner and Lily. These two characters, but not Michael, share a playful, irreverent attitude towards the icons of pomp, wealth and power that furnish the mayor's parlour, and a capacity for enjoyment of their horrifying experience together. Skinner, who, unlike Lily, is instinctively aware of the political significance of their being inside the Guildhall, reacts to the discovery with an outburst of what may surely be described as carnivalesque laughter:

*SKINNER's inspection is now complete –and he realizes where he is. He bursts into sudden laughter– a mixture of delight and excitement and malice ... Still laughing, he races right round the room, pounds on the door with his fists, runs downstage and does a sommersault across the table.* (Friel 1984, 115)

He creates the Bakhtinian community of abundance and sharing by offering drinks all round from the mayor's cabinet –“Compliments of the city” (Friel 1984, 123)– helping himself to the mayor's cigars, using his phone and turning his radio on. In a further carnivalesque move, he ‘crowns’ himself by putting on a splendid mayoral robe and an enormous ceremonial hat, while he announces that “Through tattered clothes small vices do appear; Robes and furred gowns hide all” (Friel 1984, 135), a statement whose intertextual load is obvious, coming as it does from King Lear's denunciation of the unjust dealings of institutional justice. Skinner seeks to extend the ‘crowning’ to Lily and Michael by telling them that if they also put on the mayoral robes, “I'll give you both the freedom of the city” (Friel 1984, 135), thus momentarily reversing their real social and economic standing. Lily accepts, and she and Skinner stage a parody of a ceremonial parade as Lord and Lady Mayor of Derry, and the carnival culminates with their singing and dancing around the room. Shortly before leaving the Guildhall, there is another carnivalesque inversion when Skinner impersonates the mayor presiding over an imaginary meeting of the corporation and ordering that city landscape should be improved so that its unemployed may pursue their idleness in as pleasant an environment as possible (Friel 1984, 160).

Skinner's carnivalesque attitude not only includes irreverent subversion, but also, as has been said, the capacity to build a community of human sympathy with Lily, a community based on sharing –of the material abundance Skinner offers while in the mayor's parlour (the drinks, the phone); the daily meal Lily offers Skinner once they get out (Friel 1984, 152)– and on a frank mode of communication. It is to Skinner, not to Michael, that Lily discloses her true motive for going on all the civil rights marches: her son Declan, a mongol. In these ways, Skinner and Lily temporarily release themselves from official time and history into an ‘island’ of collectivity and equality –arguably, Skinner's sticking the fourteenth century ceremonial sword into the portrait of Sir Joshua Hetherington, a forgotten civic dignitary, as he says “It's only a picture. And a ceremonial sword” (Friel 1984, 161), may be read as bespeaking the carnivalesque, ‘degrading’ retreat from history. It is, in any case, Skinner's response to Michael's “And now, Skinner, you tell us what you want. You're part of the fourteen per cent too. What do you want?” (Friel 1984, 161). Michael does not share Lily and Skinner's debunking attitude. His reaction to the discovery that they are in the mayor's parlour is reverential and deferential (Friel 1984, 119-20), he refuses the drink and the cigar Skinner offers and objects strongly to the others' games with the phone and the mayor's robes. Although there is hardly any presence of Bakhtin's grotesque body in the play –Lily's hurried exits to the toilet after some carnivalesque excess being the exception (e.g. Friel 1984, 165)–<sup>3</sup> Michael is characterized as its opposite in Bakhtinian terms, that is, as the atomized bourgeois subject, not at home in the popular carnivalesque culture Skinner and Lily embody.

In sum, then, value in *The Freedom of the City* rests with Skinner and Lily. Arguably, this lays the play open to the same charge that has been aimed at Bakhtin's analysis of the common people who embody the carnivalesque spirit: the charge of idealization, of constructing a common people who are instinctively rebellious, re-

generative and able to maintain a healthy stance of joyful relativity amid the abstractions and dogmatism of political life (Clark and Holquist 1984, 310-11; Holquist 1984, xix). Friel's characterization of the community formed between Lily and Skinner is fully congruent with Bakhtin's conceptualization of carnival as a "temporary liberation" (1984, 10) from the culture of officialdom—quite literally so, since they have to emerge from the Guildhall eventually, and leave the "'island' in the sea of history" (Clark and Holquist 1984, 301) that they have been stranded on. Bakhtin's very adjective, "temporary", points to the paradox of carnival and of Friel's play: how successful must we consider the carnivalesque to be as a bulwark against repression—Bakhtin speaks of a victory over the fear engendered by official culture—when in fact it offers a transitory world *outside* officialdom, history and politics? Must not carnivalesque culture be seen to sustain official culture by providing what is ultimately only a temporally and spatially limited outlet for transgression? In this respect, Bakhtin's analysis of carnival as offering "an extrapolitical aspect of the world" (1984, 6) is again entirely congruent with *The Freedom of the City*, a play that delegitimizes two of the most obvious forms of political action in Northern Ireland in the early 1970s: republicanism—witness the inflated rhetoric of the drunken balladeer (Friel 1984, 118-19; 148)—and civil rights—witness Michael, who has been on every civil rights march from the very start (Friel 1984, 127) and whose faith in the power of peaceful action is represented in the play as utterly naive, both through Skinner's scornful remarks and through Michael's own misguided trust that the security forces will not shoot them when they walk out of the Guildhall. Rather than include the historical and political dimensions, then, the play seeks to erase them, that is, to prove that they are irrelevant to an understanding of the 'real' plight of the 'common people'. One may wonder whether the paradoxical effect of *The Freedom of the City* may not be the same as that of Bakhtin's carnival: by idealizing the common people, to disable them politically and, thus, contain transgression.

The role played by the elderly American sociologist Dr Dodds, who has been described as one of the most difficult figures in the play to assess (Winkler 1981, 22), may be shown to support this reading of the play. In the first place, Dodds is presented as an outsider, an American, uninvolved in the action and with no obvious ideological or institutional axe to grind. This is stressed by his calm, easy-going, informal manner every time he walks on stage. His speeches do not refer specifically to Skinner, Lily and Michael. He is the voice of 'science', speaking generally and 'objectively' about the class of people the three belong to, which he calls the "subculture of poverty" (Friel 1984, 110). Secondly, he always addresses the audience directly, thus breaking through the naturalistic fourth wall, and challenges them as harbouring middle-class prejudices against people like Skinner, Lily and Michael (Friel 1984, 135). Finally, he provides the social and economic considerations that the judge discards as irrelevant at the start of the play. In bringing them in, he universalizes the plight of the three, enlarging it far beyond the specific Northern Irish situation. Clearly, in all of these ways Dodds functions as a mediator between the middle-class audience and the three Bogsiders. As such, his contribution to the play's idealization and political neutralization of the 'common people' is crucial, precisely because it is couched in the 'objective', 'detached' terms of American sociological science. We may recall, in particular, the speech where he begins by disclaiming any wish to idealize the subculture of poverty, and then goes on to describe it in a carnivalesque way as a present-orientated, existentialist culture of spontaneity, of appreciation of the sensual

and indulgence in impulse –in short, he says, “they often have a hell of a lot more fun than we have” (Friel 1984, 135). Dodds, then, crucially reinforces the play’s attempt to appease the anxiety of its middle-class audiences in Northern Ireland and beyond (why should Dodds be American?) over (potentially revolutionary) political action on the part of the ‘common people’.

This is not to deny that *The Freedom of the City* is critical of the *statu quo* –it is, as has been shown above, especially in the figure of the English judge. But it is to claim that beyond the obvious reading one may also detect in the play a deep anxiety about the political potential of the ‘common’ Northern Irish people in the early 1970s and a concomitant desire to transcend politics and history –arguably not the most effective solution to a conflict which *is* political and historical. Interestingly enough, the play itself seems to admit as much on the single occasion when the naturalistic characterization of Skinner, Lily and Michael is dropped, that is, in the three ‘dead’ speeches at the start of Act Two. It is worth quoting Skinner in particular, since through the rest of the play he is the main exponent of the carnivalesque:

As we stood on the Guildhall steps, two thoughts raced through my mind: how seriously they took us and how unpardonably casual we were about them ... And my last thought was: if you’re going to decide to take them on, Adrian Casimir, you’ve got to mend your ways. So I died, as I lived, indefensive flippancy. (Friel 1984, 150)

Alan Sinfield (1992, 235) has claimed that the most interesting, substantial kind of writing are texts written across what he calls ‘ideological faultlines’. Such texts allow contradictions to be heard, thus speaking to and facilitating debate, their cultural power depending precisely on their indeterminacy. Friel’s *The Freedom of the City* is, arguably, one such culturally powerful artifact. It is hoped that this paper has gone some way towards uncovering its ideological complexity.

## Notes

1. I am reluctant to use Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* in relation to *The Freedom of the City*. Through alienation effects Brecht sought to undermine the naturalism that had come to dominate the theatre by the end of the 19th century, which, in his view, had become the vehicle for a bourgeois world-view that presented itself as natural and inevitable. Alienation effects stressed the theatricality of the performance, its fictionality, as well as the constructed nature of bourgeois ideology. They prevented the audience from becoming emotionally identified with the characters and action and fostered instead a distanced, Marxist analysis of them. Friel’s play, by beginning as it does with the display of the three dead bodies, does place the emphasis on the process leading to the deaths rather than on the final outcome of the action, a major feature of Brechtian epic theatre (Birker 1984, 155). However, as explained above, the play is far from preventing all emotional identification between the audience and the characters, and it is similarly far from putting forward a Marxist analysis of the events it portrays. The use of Brecht’s *Verfremdungseffekt* would be, on these grounds, a case of undue appropriation (McCullough 1992).
2. Such a reversal is of course historically significant. As is well known, at the time *The Freedom of the City* was written, the population of Derry was two-thirds Catholic, but the

City Council, through gerrymandering, was two-thirds Protestant (O'Brien 1972, 129). Further, the siege of 1689, in which Derry Protestants withstood James II's Catholic forces, has been described as the "original and most powerful myth" of the Northern Protestant community (Brown 1985, 8). Derry's 17th-century walls, at least up to the time *The Freedom of the City* was written, jealously separated the Protestant minority living within them, near the centre of power, from the Catholic majority living without, on the margins. Every year on 12 August the Protestants march along the top of the walls, triumphantly "looking down on the descendants of the unsuccessful besiegers" (O'Brien 1972, 177).

3. Such an absence is in itself an interesting topic –for another occasion.

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