Brendan Kennelly's *Cromwell*: black comedy as exorcism

Cromwell, *de Brendan Kennelly: el humor negro como exorcismo*

Beatriz VILLACAÑAS

Universidad Complutense de Madrid.
Departamento de Filología Inglesa II

Recibido: 6 de febrero de 2003
Aceptado: 1 de abril de 2003

ABSTRACT

This article analyses how the nightmare of Irish history becomes black comedy, de-sentimentalised and thus all the more intense. We shall see *Cromwell* as poetry dealing with violence, historical violence and the violence of life itself and how, through unrestraint and anachronism, it makes us aware of hell, past and present, and aware of comedy. «Our beautiful world is a horror pit», Kennelly affirms; «how can our poetry not be comic?» The black comedy of *Cromwell* becomes a kind of catharsis, an exorcism of demons, an immersion in the sheer contradiction of living, in the horror-pit and in the comic show, with the liberating force of violent and honest poetry.

KEY WORDS

Cromwell. Brendan Kennelly. Ireland. Black comedy. Exorcism.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se analiza cómo la pesadilla de la historia irlandesa se convierte en comedia de humor negro, libre de sentimentalismo y, por ende, más intensa. Veremos, asimismo, cómo *Cromwell* es poesía que se ocupa de la violencia, la histórica y la de la misma vida, y de qué manera, a través de un particular desenfreno poético y del anacronismo cómo recurso literario, se nos muestra tanto el infierno, pasado y presente, como la comedia. «Nuestro hermoso mundo es una sima de horror», afirma Kennelly, «¿Cómo puede nuestra poesía no ser cómica?» La comedia de humor negro de *Cromwell* se convierte, pues, en una especie de catarsis, en un exorcismo de demonios, en inmersión en la total contradicción del vivir, en la sima de horror y en el espectáculo circense, con la fuerza libertadora de una poesía violenta y sincera.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Cromwell. Brendan Kennelly. Irlanda. Humor negro. Exorcismo.

1. Cromwell and *Cromwell*

Many are the names that crowd Irish history and which are associated with blood-shed, deceit and robbery of land, but the name of Oliver Cromwell reigns over all these as the paradigm of ruthless cruelty, murder and devastation[1]. Ever since the time of his campaigns in Ireland, Cromwell has come to personify evil in the country, with children growing up in fear of his name as children elsewhere have traditionally grown up fearing ogres or some terrifying figures to whom popular imagination gave diverse names in different places. But the great difference between these and Cromwell lies in the fact that while the former sprang from folklore and fairy tales, the latter is rooted in history. What all the imagined evil-doers performed in the realm of fantasy, he performed in reality itself and no matter how inflamed Irish popular imagination might have been about him, his actions were no fiction. Not only the confiscation of the land from its Irish owners took a more steadfast pace with the intervention of The Lord Protector, but he gave orders that all fortresses and any building that could circumstantially serve military purposes be raised to the ground. This resulted in not only the destruction of castles but also such buildings as abbeys and monasteries amongst others were burnt down by his troops. Still, at the present day, any visitor to Ireland can very quickly become familiar with the ruins that spot the countryside and which date back to Cromwellian times. One is aware that Brendan Kennelly himself, being a native of Ballylongford, Co. Kerry, grew up like so many of his countrymen, with the image of one of these ruins a few miles from his family home, namely, Lisloughlin Abbey, of which a sole wall with a prepossessing Gothic window is extant. But such traces as Oliver Cromwell left on the Irish landscape are just the visible metaphor of those he left on the Irish collective memory with his killing campaigns waged at Drogheda, Wexford, Clonmell and many other sites. Any history dealing with these can equal, if not surpass, a tale of horror:

> This [Drogheda] was really the most important town in Ireland; and Cromwell, whose skill as a military general cannot be disputed, at once determined to lay siege to it. He encamped before the devoted city on the 2nd of September, and in a few days had his siege guns posted on the hill still known as Cromwell's Fort. Two breaches were made on the 10th, and he sent his storming parties about five o'clock in the evening. Earthworks had been thrown up inside, and the garrison resisted with undiminished bravery. The besieged at last wavered ... The officers and soldiers were exterminated, and then men, women and children were put to the sword. The butchery occupied five entire days (Cusack 1868/1995: 500-501)

[1] Though the established way of life in Ireland was badly shaken during the reign of Elizabeth I, a lot managed to survive. The Cromwellian campaign, followed by the Cromwellian settlement or plantation, spelt the death knell for the remnants of this way of life. The massacres of the campaign followed by the confiscation of land, the displacement of population, the destruction of means of livelihood, starvation, exile, and deportations meant (according to Morton, 1938/1999:221) that in a mere decade the native Irish population was reduced to half. Furthermore, that surviving half was utterly empoverished and subjected to devastating economic and penal conditions. (See also, in this respect, Gentles 1992, Scott Scott Wheeler 2000)

More than three hundred years after the above narrated facts took place, an Irish poet decides to write a book of poetry entitled *Cromwell*: an unusually long book for a book of poetry (over 250 poems) with which Brendan Kennelly, this Irish poet, is not only challenging himself to write poetry out of history (which is, in itself, no small risk) but (and this is probably an even more difficult task) to try to come to terms through poetry with his own wounded memory as an Irishman. Such a challenge entails facing his own demons, and those of the Irish collective memory, dealing honestly with hatred, pain, inchoate identity and the vicious circle of violence. But to deal honestly with emotions, that is, honesty and sincerity, do not in themselves constitute poetry, and *Cromwell* is, even in its irregularity (or, perhaps, partly due to its peculiar kind of irregularity), a book of robust poetry. How has Kennelly accomplished, then, such a book? No doubt his mastery of language is a most solid starting point, but, in no lesser degree, is this accomplishment to be attributed to his mastery of different registers and discourses. This latter enables him *to speak from the mind of Oliver Cromwell*, to inhabit him who is considered the greatest malefactor of Ireland. Thus, many of the poems are written in the first person, from Cromwell's own perspective:

> Loving brother, I am glad to hear of your welfare
> And that our children have so much leisure
> They can travel far to eat cherries.
> This is most excusable in my daughter
> Who loves that fruit and whom I bless.
> Tell her I expect she writes often to me
> And that she be kept in some exercise.
> Cherries and exercise go well together.
> I have delivered my son up to you.
> I hope you counsel him; he will need it;
> I choose to believe he believes what you say.
> I send my affection to all your family.
> Let sons and daughters be serious; the age requires it.
> I have things to do, all in my own way.
> ...
>
> («Oliver to His Brother» 22)

This ability for impersonation is extended to other characters in the book, such as Edmund («Ed») Spenser, William of Orange and, of course, the book's hero (or anti-hero), Buffún, who can be, at the same time, the projection of the poet's troubled conscience and that of the Irish as a nation in permanent conflict:

> When I consider what all this has made me
> I marvel at the catalogue:

I am that prince of liars, Xavier O'Grady,
I am Tom Gorman, dead in the bog,
I am Luke O'Shea in Limerick prison,
I sell subversive papers at a church gate,
Men astound me, I am outside women,
I have fed myself on the bread of hate,
I am an emigrant in whose brain
Ireland bleeds and cannot cease
To bleed till I come home again
To fields that are a parody of peace.
I sing tragic songs, I am madly funny,
I'd sell my country for a fist of money,
I am a big family,
I am a safe-hearted puritan
Blaming it all on the Jansenists
Who, like myself, were creatures on the run.
I am a home-made bomb, a smuggled gun.
...

(«Am» 159)

Despite the tragic note of the above lines and the general tragedy inherent to such a work as *Cromwell*, or, perhaps precisely due to that tragedy, as we shall see below, humour is a kind of unifying force within such a diverse, at times contradictory, and unrestrained book of poetry. A type of humour which often manifests itself as black comedy, fierce jokes and grim irony:

'Most fair and virtuous lady' wrote Ed,
'I am happy to make known to you
The humble affection I have always professed
And bear to that House from which your true
Heart springs.
...
Simple is the device,
The composition mean. Yet I dare to set
Them at your feet, hoping that they may catch your eye
And that I may receive your noble favour.
One moment's joy to you justifies the work
Of all my days. Your Honour's humbly ever,
Edmund Spenser.'

Ed sealed the poem and sighed,
'Anything to escape from fucking Cork!'

(«Dedication» 49)

Kennelly's knowledge of Irish history is patent particularly in certain poems and, in «A Bad Time», at first sight, he seems but to paraphrase the following account by M.F.Cusack (1868/1995: 502) of a shockingly cruel episode of the Drogheda massacre:

> When the slaughter had been accomplished above, it was continued below. Neither youth nor beauty was spared. Thomas Wood, who was one of these officers, and brother to Anthony Wood, the Oxford historian, says he found in these vaults 'the flower and the choicest of the women and ladies belonging to the town; amongst whom, a most handsome virgin, arrayed in costly and gorgeous apparel', kneeled down to him 'with tears and prayers to save her life'. Touched by her beauty and her entreaties, he attempted to save her, and took her out of the church; but even his protection could not save her. A soldier thrust his sword into her body; and the officer, recovering from his momentary fit of compassion, 'flung her down over the rocks', according to his own account, but first took care to possess himself of her money and jewels.

Here are Kennelly's verses concerning the story:

> Having butchered everyone in the church
> The soldiers explore the vaults underneath
> Where the choicest ladies are hidden
> Hoping to cheat general death.
> One of these, a most handsome virgin,
> Kneels down to Thomas à Wood, with prayers
> And tears, that he may spare her life.
> Sudden pity; he takes her in his arms
> Out of the church, intending her escape.
> A soldier sees this and pikes her through.
> À Wood, seeing her gasping, takes her money
> And jewels, flings her down over the works.
> Massacre flows for five days in succession.

But after all this horror, which the poet has chosen to handle in sober narrative form, the last line strikes a note of black humour anticlimax:

> A bad time for virgins, local people say.
> («A Bad Time» 53)

A most significant example of the kind of humour pervading *Cromwell* is the poem entitled «Manager, perhaps?» As Anthony O'Reilly comments (2002: 3):

> [Brendan Kennelly's] vivid imagination (*who else could make a poetic Oliver Cromwell the manager of Drogheda United Football Club*? — [my italics], great wit and learned observations,

enjoin him with Séamus Heaney, Michael Longley and John Hewitt, to proclaim the vibrant good health of the literary, cultural and poetic Ireland of today.

Indeed, after what history tells us of the Drogheda massacre, still vivid in the Irish memory, the fierce humour of the poem rings a savagely funny chord:

> The first time I met Oliver Cromwell
> The poor man was visibly distressed.
> 'Buffún' says he, 'things are gone to the devil
> In England. So I popped over here for a rest.
> ...
> Good Lord! I'm worn out from intrigue and work.
> I'd like a little estate down in Kerry,
> A spot of salmon-fishing, riding to hounds.
> Good Lord! The very thought makes me delighted.
> Being a sporting chap, I'd really love to
> Get behind one of the best sides in the land.
> Manager, perhaps, of Drogheda United?'
> («Manager, Perhaps?» 27)

Nevertheless, we must not forget that, in *Cromwell*, the author is dealing with history which has become *nightmare*, a nightmare populated by figures which are, at the same time, *historical and oniric entities* and, as such oniric entities (and to some extent as historical entities also), they have to be overcome, conquered, exorcised from the poet's (and Ireland's) psyche. As we shall see, Kennelly's strategy for poetically coming to terms with the trauma of nightmarish history in *Cromwell* has been to expand the limits of poetry itself, to give vent to a purposeful *unrestraint* and to dwell most skilfully in *anachronism*, all of which makes the book at once more tragic and more comical, sadder and funnier.

2. Poetrys unrestraint

Focusing on the text itself, I could say that *Cromwell* is a long poem made up of several short ones with a unifying theme. But just after having used the word «unifying» one is aware of the inadequacy of the term, basically because this work seems to spring from an impulse of liberation which, probably due to the very sway of this impulse, manifests itself in different, quite often opposed voices, tones, rhetorical options, strategies of communication, poetic expression. In short, we are not facing an even surface or a unitary book of poetry, but this certainly does not necessarily imply flaw or failure. On the contrary, I believe that a great part of the vitality of Kennelly's book lies precisely in the manifold artistic and emotional reactions that are triggered by the apparently single theme of *Cromwell*.

With *Cromwell* we are confronted with a book of poetry which stems from what seems a purposeful *unrestraint*, with a kind of anarchy arranged to provide a non-rigid framework

whose limits can be expanded, forced, or even trespassed upon so that, in the words of Richard Kearney (1997:138-139):

> [Kennelly can set out] to unravel the competing myths which inform the collective memory of Cromwell ... the imagination knows no censorship... This translation of Irish mythology into poetic psychodrama allows for a new sense of freedom to emerge.

A fundamental part of the poet's unrestraint is his trespassing over the boundaries of the tragic and the comic tones and, in the case of *Cromwell*, he deals with «the nightmare of Irish history», dreamt by and presented to us by «the poem's little hero», as the author calls him, M.P.G.M. Buffún (Michael, Patrick, Gusty, Mary Buffún), refusing to follow any decorum regarding genre, not letting himself be overawed, possessed, by the myth of Ireland's greatest evil-doer. While acknowledging Cromwell's devastating effects in the Irish psyche, Kennelly takes hold of the myth, subjects him to his own rules —which only he can break because they are his— and thus dispossesses him of his demonic power. Cromwell appears then as a great actor in a *black comedy*, together with The Giant, The Belly, Mum, Big Island, little island, Edmund Spenser, and all the other characters perceived through the unsteady Irish psyche of Buffún.

Indeed, the figure of Cromwell is a myth in Ireland, a myth of horror and devastation which epitomises Kennelly's own conception of history, particularly Irish history, as nightmare. The Lord Protector is, therefore, a representation of absolute evil in the Irish collective/historical mind. But myth and symbol transcend the realm of the rational, especially when they are intertwined or associated with suffering, death, violence of any kind. Myth and symbol place us within the slippery ground of the unconscious, of passions, of vulnerability. It is precisely here where Kennelly has chosen to embark on writing such a book as *Cromwell*, opting to expose himself to his own feelings as an Irishman and as an Irish poet, aware of the inseparability of historical evil and present contradictions, of Irish oppression and Irish search for identity, of injustice and vengeance, of power and abuse, of nightmare and reality. Likewise, he is aware of experience generating bad dreams and bad dreams generating experience: «I do not want this dream but it dreams me». This is the opening line of the poem entitled «Nothing Now» (115) and, in a way, we can say it is also paradigmatic of Kennelly's submitting himself to collective and personal nightmare, because he seems to know, as *Cromwell* shows, that from that submission to the darkness of the unconscious the new light of individual and communal sanity may arise. There is no restraint in dreams. But to let oneself be temporarily possessed by a long traumatic nightmare, to look at horror in the face can be a form of liberation, a cathartic rebirth from ashes:

> If this is a dream, I dream it scares me...
> ...
> Next, the butcher —or was it myself?— tipped
> The bucket on its side, the blood
> Splashed the grass in a red unruly sprawl.

I remember thinking, as the blood escaped
Into the earth, that Oliver did what Oliver did.
So did the butcher. So do I. So do we all.
(«Vintage» 147)

To deal with the awareness of the promiscuous reality of life and its effects on himself as a native of a land still deeply immersed in conflict has been Kennelly's option in such a work as *Cromwell*. A poet's options are a measure of both his/her artistic idiosyncrasy and his/her personality as a human being. Kennelly is both a man and a poet of exuberance, who vocationally immerses himself in social activity and poetic production. Within the latter he criss-crosses comedy and tragedy, moving lyricism and coarse language, different, even opposite voices, myth and farce, while he jokes about myth being at once repelled and fascinated by it. As Edna Longley (1994:198) affirms: «*Cromwell* extroverts, explodes. It abounds in catalogues, accumulations, bad taste, bad jokes, bad language, melodrama, shock-tactics, grotesque disproportions, hyperboles, going over the top.» In this extroversion, or «explosion», Kennelly forces and ultimately breaks the limits of what has been traditionally considered the poetic register, the limits of aesthetic assumptions. He runs the risk of falling into vulgarity and quite often does fall headlong into it:

Big Island whispered to little island
'I'm right here at your back.
Shall I bugger you?
Shall I breathe down your neck?
Most of the time I hardly see you at all
You're so small, you're so small
And when you insist that you really exist
I can scarcely follow your voice.
Well, do you exist, you sea-shrouded mite?
Or are you a floating illusion
Invisible to all except me?'
...
(«In the Sea» 111).

However, one has the impression that the poet would not mind any accusation of bad taste since, after all, he is the man who, in his essay «Poetry and Violence», does not hesitate to affirm that:

> At the roots of good taste lies barbarism. In museums reposes evidence of murder and massacres; ... violence is the begetter of sweetness and gentleness. Murderous disorder is often the source of that beautiful, unruffled self-possession and order which are associated with style (Kennelly 1994:32).

The irony of the following lines is good proof of the above:

'Ed Spenser is a great lad for beauty'
Nodded Oliver, 'He has devoted nights and days
To pleasuring his fellow-countrymen.
Therefore, say I, he deserves all praise.
I mean, Buffún, just glance at this nasty world,
Look at the ways these humans treat each other.
You'd swear to God that men were bloody apes
Or worse, the way brother murders brother,
Towns are flattened, women and children killed,
Great Houses gutted, the Word of God betrayed,
Satan enthroned, all virtue put to flight.
Aren't we lucky, then, to have such a skilled
poet, one who has truly learned his trade
Of delight, delight, delight?'
(«Delight» 110)

Cromwell is, thus, a projection of Kennelly's artistic personality, of which his more recent book, *Glimpses* (2001), is a provocative and perhaps more extreme example. He has long been making his own poetic statement of honesty, open-mindedness, outspokenness:

If my sleep is a pool where my friends drop
Inquisitive stones, observing my dreams
Ripple out to extinction, I'll put up
With that. Friends have claims, though some be bums.
But it's quite another thing to bar my
Single window with long sticks of rusty
Iron and then with another bar to
Clang me where I lie, amateur and lusty.
Jack-rabbiting into the wall, I see
A Nissen hut in a spruce corner of Kent
Where a free poet pisses on glow-worms.
...
(«Iron» 92)

Reading *Cromwell*, as well as *Glimpses*, one is aware that the poet identifies honesty with unrestraint, not because he is unable to work within the framework of classical forms and unity of tone, or that he cannot work wonders with aesthetic/emotional contention in poems like «Balloons» (19), but because he seems to identify restraint, prudence, or what is commonly considered «good taste», with lack of guts (I am becoming Kennellyan now), and also with

hypocrisy. While being wary of these contradictions, he, at the same time, makes an honest statement about what he calls «the closed mind»:

> What is the closed mind? ... The greater part of Ireland is still the post-colonial end. But the effects of colonization are still deeply buried and operative in the Irish psyche. In the South of Ireland there is still a mechanical undercurrent of dislike or hatred for the English. While in the North there is a prominent, predominant, unquestioning sense of loyalty to the Crown. But it is not a love of England that wins the loyalty of Ulster Unionists, it is fear and distrust of the Southern government and people. Attitudes of many people North and South are characteristic of the closed mind, which is marked by a fierce and automatic resistance to alternatives, and by an equally fierce assertion of its own limited but ferociously held viewpoints or beliefs. The closed mind oversimplifies reality in such a way that self doubt is as unthinkable as a deep tolerance of the rights of others. The closed mind leads to fanaticism. A fanatic is a terrorist who is himself terrified of alternatives. A fanatic is a person who can see only one point of view, and who sincerely believes that most other points of view are not merely wrong but have to be exterminated. (In: Longley 1991: 21).

The effects of colonialism in the Irish psyche, with Cromwell as its symbol, are what Kennelly sets out to explore in the book thus entitled:

> 'My dear chap' said Big Island to little island
> 'You're a pest.
> I can endure you when you're silent
> But when you prattle and scrap you're the noisiest
> Mite in the sea. You're a problem
> And I've been giving sustained thought
> To a solution. It may sound grim
> To you but this vast expanse of water
> Will be unlivable if I don't deal
> With you. I'm going to cut off your head
> And having chopped it I intend to keep
> It. The rest of your body I shall
> Donate to yourself. Treat it well. Don't be sad.
> Be reasonable. You bore me when you weep.
> («A Solution» 114)

It is necessary to say, having reached this point, that Kennelly does not fall into manicheism in *Cromwell*. If the book abounds in pain and violence it is also rich in self-exploration and self-exposure, together with the poet's conflictive feelings and capability of hatred, as well as those of his country, all presented with honesty (quite often painful) throughout the book:

The Catholic bombed the Protestant's home
The Protestant bombed the Catholic's home
The Protestant castrated the Catholic
The Catholic castrated the Protestant
The Protestant set fire to the Catholic Recreation Centre
The Catholic set fire to the Protestant Recreation centre
The Catholic cut the tail of the Protestant dog
The Protestant cut the tail of the catholic dog
The Protestant hanged the catholic
The catholic hanged the Protestant
As they dangled like dolls from the freshly-painted
Protestant and catholic gibbets
They held hands in mid-air and sang
With spiritual gusto, 'Onward, Christian Soldiers!'
(«Gusto» 128)

One of the implications of the poet's affirmation that the effects of colonialism are deeply entrenched and operative in the Irish psyche is that the unconscious, or not fully conscious, level of that psyche plays an important part. The Irish collective feelings of rage, oppression, guilt, become a kind of demonic possession, a bad dream which somehow has to be exorcised, neutralised as a disease. Not surprisingly, in «Famine Fever», he shows the nightmarish vicious circle of this fever, after saying that, in fact, it has nothing to do with hunger:

The bacteria enter the bloodstream through the lungs.
Eyes, or tiny cuts in the skin.
Quick as a tick, you're a victim.
Also you too infect your own lice.
That is how the cycle begins again
...
(«Famine Fever» 120)

3. Anachronism, dreams and the synchrony of poetry

There is a flagrant subversion of chronology in *Cromwell*. After all, everything in the poem takes place within Buffún's mind, that is, the Irish collective-historical memory and historical nightmare. History in the poem is, paradoxically, *ahistorical*, since the «singularly tragic mess» (Kennelly's note to *Cromwell*: op. cit.) which the historical encounter between England and Ireland has produced is still generative of conflict, hatred, bad dreams; that is, history is still alive in the present, it lives in it and interacts with it: «Lying under the increasingly bland surfaces of Irish life are various forms of pathological hatred» (1994: 31).

Understandably, Kennelly's method of presentation of his book is, as he himself states, not chronological, but «imagistic». Anachronism is the logical offspring of history become a cyst in the psyche, a thwarted growth in collective biography:

> Friends beat me up on my way home from school.
> *Suddenly, a new time happened to me.* [my italics]
> It wasn't that I'd come the rough or acted the fool
> Too much for them to bear, it was more than they
> Needed a victim that June afternoon
> When you had to clamp your mouth against the flies
> Cancering the air. Since then, I hate June
> Because both my hips, under the bruises,
> Stopped growing.
> ...
>
> («Balloons», 1983:19)

Like nightmare itself, *Cromwell* subverts aesthetics, categories, chronology. It is this subversion of limits that allows the poet and his readers plumb the depths of the Irish context of national and social myth and individual historical traumas, to acknowledge pathology, and therefore, to set up a sort of therapy session in which it might be possible to heal the wounds. In Terence Brown's (1988: 255-6) words:

> Kennelly's work assumes the determinism of Irish history, but to portray this is not his primary purpose. Rather it is to allow the nightmare so full and complete an expression in a poetic imagining that Cromwell's time can be transcended. *Cromwell* attempts a shaman-like act of purgation, an imaginative exorcism of demonic possession, a breaking of the spell.

In dreams and, henceforth, in nightmares, events do not follow the logical temporal sequence —that is, past, present, future— of conscious, day-time life. When dreaming we come across an amalgam of facts and elements which mix randomly (or just *apparently* randomly) in our unconscious. One does not need to be a convinced Freudian to be aware of the fact that the seeming chaos of dreams obeys, as everything else, the principle of cause-effect. So far, we may not always —or perhaps hardly ever— know the ultimate causes of our dreams, but they do exist, they are operative, rooted in the still obscure mechanisms of the processing of our experience. *Cromwell* is a vivid example of this. The tragedy of Irish history is the cause of the nightmare from which the poem —each of the poems that make up the book— emerges. But Brendan Kennelly, unlike Freud, does not seek to explain his (Buffún's, Ireland's) dream. The catharsis he aims at does not spring from analysis, but from *immersion*. He allows himself *to be dreamt*, to be possessed, as it were, by the chaotic anachronism of things and events, by the grotesque horror of a coexistence of times which opens the door to the trivial while not closing it to the

horrific. Anacronism in *Cromwell* makes us sharply aware of the freakish essence of human history and experience. The harmlessness of the quotidian reveals itself to be only apparent in Kennelly's intertwining of the everyday brands and names of present time Irish reality with the permanent presence of violence and evil:

> The day after the world ended, I ven-
> tured out to my local Supermarket
> Where I'd bought many a can of Batchelor Beans.
> For these beans I've long been a sucker but
> It's their juice that really turns me on.
> If I ever drink blood, I'd like it boiled
> To this cool hue of your left-over man
> Sniffing the riff of the post-world world.
> ...
>
> («Beans» 112)

The «Boland's Crakers» of «Entertainment» or the «Batchelor Beans» of the poem above acquire the Gothic dimension of those menacing, self-transforming objects of E.T.A. Hoffman's stories, while, at the same time, the contemporary Irish poet, in his ability to show the ludicrous through the monstrous, is not far removed from the grim humour of the German author.

The disturbing element is not, however, the only consequence of anachronism. Most interestingly —the uncanny side included— anachronism is Kennelly's way of confronting us —himself in the first place— with a kind of synchronic though conflictive truth. A truth that arises from uncompromising exposure to the pain of the yet unhealed wound of history, to a horror which, being past, is only too present in a wounded —national and individual— psyche. Through poetry, Kennelly reveals this truth, or perhaps, I should better say, exposes us to it. This can be related to a point I make on the work of Juan Antonio Villacañas where I sustain that poetry, which can certainly be communication, is essentially knowledge, a knowledge *revealed* and not exclusively intellectual, but more perfect: made up of thought and emotion, an epiphany in which memory forms part of the synchrony of experience (Villacañas 2003: 125). Albeit different from Kennelly's focus, Juan Antonio Villacañas reveals the powerful poetic truth of anachronism:

> ...
> y allí donde se halle,
> que hablo del Cristo de la Calavera,
> pero es sólo una calle,
> al lado de San Justo y sin acera:
> Dios deja a Cristo de cualquiera manera.
>
> («Casi una Biografía», 1993: 54)

...
Wherever he may be,
for its about the Calavera Christ I'm talking,
but it's only a street,
close to San Justo, unpaved, a lone street only:
God drops Christ anyway, however lonely.
(«Almost a Biography» - my translation)

The present day state of a street in a Spanish city, derelict and without pavement, is here a means of revelation of the abandonment by God that Christ as a man experienced in his time and, significantly, that Christ as humanity (and, thus, as the poet himself) can experience *at any given time*. Thus, the synchronic experience transcends the diachrony of history, and through the anachronism sustained in the street metaphor (a metaphor which is at the same time a reality, a concrete street in a state of dereliction) this perennial abandonment is definitely revealed in the tremendous last line: «Dios deja a Cristo de cualquier manera». The Spanish poet underscores this insight claiming «Por el anacronismo se camina» (1993: 49) («Along anacronism we do walk»). He knows and shows that, in poetry, transgression of the logical, conventional sequence of time, that is, *anachronism*, can lead to synchronic truth.

Brendan Kennelly's poetic intuition captures the potential of anachronism and sets it at work in *Cromwell*. In the poem «The Crowd and the Curse», a multitude of people that the poet can show to be our contemporaries by including the figure of the Black and Tan[2], cannot yet escape the curse of history, nor «the curse» itself, as Cromwell is known in Ireland. Cromwell is still harmfully alive:

The crowd looks at the spot where the boy bled
To death shot in the back by a tan in a lorry
The crowd is fingers chilling the beads
Breath of hundreds an icicle prayer
The curse sneers up the road from the sea
The crowd splits the night with its need
The curse and the crowd copulate there. [my italics]
(29)

The synchronic truth of Kennelly's poetry makes it possible for us to understand lines like the following:

[2] This refers to another brutal and sinister stage of early 20th century Irish history when the British authorities commissioned a body of irregular troops (many drawn from ex-convict and other problematic backgrounds) to quell rebellion in Ireland. These troops were metonymically referred to as the «Black and Tans» due to the colour scheme of their military attire.

The first time I heard the curse in sleep
Was now and a thousand years ago... [My italics]
(«The Curse» 26)

The potential of anachronism is manifold. Humour is one of its most characteristic results. In «Manager, perhaps?», as we have already seen, all the dark humour contained in each line builds up and reaches its climax in a last line where we come across the name of a popular Irish local soccer team (27). Humorous literature has often exploited anachronism as a source of comic effect, very often when it comes to linguistic expressions and registers which do not chronologically correspond to a given historical period. There are countless examples of the use of this strategy, a well-known Spanish case being Muñoz Seca's *La Venganza de Don Mendo*, also turned into at least two films (the cinema has not been far behind literature in this respect). But Muñoz Seca's verse play is certainly many degrees brighter than the black comedy contained in Kennelly's book. In the latter, humour is fierce, aggressive, ruthless, rooted in traumatic historical experience become nightmare, a nightmare whose demons and their insidious malignity have somehow to be exorcised.

4. Exorcising demons through black comedy

Kennelly, who can make his readers step on the ground of tragedy, does not seem very inclined to leave them there for a long time, since humour, though often black and bleak, is, as we know, one of the poet's most recurring characteristics. If he can be familiar with tragedy, he certainly believes in comedy. Talking about his admired Patrick Kavanagh in a conversation with Aengus Fanning, editor of *The Irish Independent*, he states:

> He said that poetry was essentially comic and I wondered what he meant by that. I see him as mystical, and *The Great Hunger* as tragedy. But Kavanagh said tragedy was underdeveloped comedy, comedy not fully born. (2001: 14)

The words are Kavanagh's, but Kennelly's echoing of them to some extent indicate his own personal and poetic concern with the ideas expressed by the Monaghan poet, particularly if we consider them as part of a general background, as is Kennelly's (1994:109-126) essay entitled: «Patrick Kavanagh's *Comic Vision*» [My italics] and perhaps even more so if we just remember the Kerry poet's own words: «Our beautiful world is a horror-pit, how can our poetry not be comic?» (1994:70). These words bear witness to his coherence as a poet, since a few years earlier, in 1983, he had dealt with the horror-myth of Cromwell in a *comic vein*. A comic vein of grim, black humour, which stunned critics and public: they were faced with comic verse springing from the killer of Irish women and children, the «butcher», the «curse»:

'I was on Dexedrine during my entire
Irish campaign, Buffún,' Oliver said,

'That, and this recurring silver of a Bach cantata
Tripping through my head
Kept me from going Irishmad.
I could walk for forty miles a day
So long as I popped some pills along the way.
Could I work miracles in Ireland? I did.
But Jesus, Buff, the effect on my hormones
Was something to behold.
...
Striding among those dying groans and moans
I composed limericks, epigrams of detonating wit
Concerning the performance of my not ignobly proportioned prick.'
(«Performance» 107)

«What do we do with the violence of our emotions?» asks Kennelly (1994:11) in his essay «Poetry and Violence». Looking back at *Cromwell*, the poet's answer had been to face them, even to joke about them although the joke might hurt, repel, outrage. In the end, the author seems to say, to face horror and to be able to joke at the same time will have a liberating effect, horror will be exorcised out of our nightmare. As Inés Praga (1996:237) points out:

> De este modo los demonios históricos se convierten en héroes de una especie de «Mock-heroic fiction» y la leyenda negra que arrastra consigo la sombra cromwelliana se convierte, gracias a Kennelly, en sicodrama poético lleno de un humor desinhibido e iconoclasta...

Undoubtedly, a strong vein of black humour prevails in most of the many poems which make up *Cromwell* (a book presented as *a poem*, as the cover page makes clear), although there are those few with a downright melancholic or even tragic tone. But even leaving the latter aside, several compositions at times differ drastically from one another. As we know, the very perspective varies (that of Big Island talking to little island, that of Ed Spencer's etc.) and quite often fluctuates from that of Buffún to that of Cromwell himself. In all cases black comedy is achieved, but when Cromwell speaks in the first person, the poet endows it with a quality of awesomeness through the Lord Protector's words full of unshakeable self-righteousness:

'Mine was the first Friend's face Ireland ever saw,
little as it recognised me' Oliver said.
'I came equipped with God's Fact, God's Law.
What did I find? Not men but hordes
Full of hatred, falsity and noise,
Undrilled, unpaid, driving herds of plundered
Cattle before them for subsistence;
Rushing down from hillsides, ambuscades,

Passes in the mountains, taking shelter in bogs
Where cavalry could not follow them;
...
Glancing now at my bundle of Irish letters
(A form I think I have perfected)
I see a land run by Sanguinary Quacks
Utterly unconscious of their betters.
...

(«A Friend of the People» 24)

The above lines are in total consonance with the following claim made by Declan Kiberd (1996:9):

> From the later sixteenth century, when Edmund Spenser walked the plantations of Munster, the English have presented themselves to the world as controlled, refined and rooted; and so it suited them to find the Irish hot-headed, rude and nomadic, the perfect foil to set off their virtues.

Likewise, all things and people of Oliver's world partake of his perspective, which is, extensively, that of his own country:

This evening, about five o'clock,
The Lord Protector set out for Ireland
In a coach with six gallant Flanders mares
And a life-guard consisting of eighty men...
...
May God bring Cromwell safe to Dublin
To propagate the Gospel of Christ
Among the barbarous, bloodthirsty Irish
Whose cursing, swearing, drunken ways
Dishonour God by sea and land.
Visit them, Oliver, like God's right hand.

(«According to *The Moderate Intelligencer*» 23)

As Kiberd (1996: 9) continues:

> No sooner had these stereotypes [those of the English and the Irish] taken their initial shape than they were challenged by poets and intellectuals writing in the Irish language, and they rapidly learned to decode those texts which presumed to decode them.

Undoubtedly, the Kerry poet, writing now in English, is, as we have seen, a most advanced disciple of those poets and intellectuals Kiberd refers to. His skill in the use of black comedy effectively decodes the above-mentioned stereotypes.

Conversely to Cromwell's, Buffún's perspective, his perception of himself and of things, his own Irish identity, is troubled, fragile. His creativity and wit are inevitably downtrodden —as happens in the case of the submitted— by stolid power:

> Oliver said, 'Come, Buffún, tell me a joke.
> Badly do I need a laugh, being tired of triumph.
> Conquest is grim, 'tis but a kind of rack
> On which my mind is stretched from dawn till night.
> So come on, perform for me. Here's a biscuit-tin,
> Stand up on it, paint your face, hump your back,
> Dear Fatuus Homunculus Hibernicus. A feast of wit
> Is what I need. Let me laugh away this rack.'
> I hoped on the biscuit tin, Boland's Crackers, in fact.
> 'Oliver' I said 'I'm your doctor. You're sick.
> You have five minutes to live.' 'My God' howled Oliver,
> 'Five minutes! Is there *anything* you can do for me?'
> 'Perhaps' I opined 'I could boil you an egg.'
> 'Thou cod' stormed Oliver, 'Hand me my whip. Bend over!'
> («Entertainment» 105)

The very stolidness of Cromwell's thought makes him even more powerful, it immunises him against doubt, remorse or whatever nuances of reflection making him impervious to all such factors. Thus, he can speak of his intellectual friend in Oxford, a teacher of History, with characteristic superiority:

> 'I have this learned friend at Oxford'
> Chimed Oliver. 'He teaches history
> To young gentlemen who should know the state
> Of things because one day, like it or not, they
> Must grow up to do what they must do.
> ...
> But when he talks to me of history
> I have to smile. This tends to madden him.
> «Cromwell, your smiling has always attacked
> My views of history. What is history then?
> You tell me.»
> I let him wait for my reply.
>
> «History is when I decide to act.»'
> («History» 51)

Such conflictive themes in Ireland as religion and language are also handled with characteristic irony:

'Matters are working for us throughout the world.
There's excellent news from Montague at sea
Turning a Spanish fleet to ashes.
The recent earthquake at Lima
Has helped also.
...
God's Hand is visible in war
When He permits even Antichrist to make a contribution.'
(«A Contribution» 21)

'I must confess, Buffún', honestied Oliver
'Your native language strikes me as barbarous,
Rude in the mouth, agony on the ear,
Your very name's ridiculous
Suggesting some aboriginal fool
astray where he should be most at home.
Stones and pebbles cram every native mouth, Buffún.

Quit this confusion.

If the people of England are the people of God
Then England's language is the language of heaven
Which every Christian gentleman should use.
Immerse yourself in that felicitous tongue,
Absorb its magic through proper attention,
Utter yourself, universalise your views.'
(«Stones and Pebbles and the Language of Heaven» 45)

The different perspectives do not only contribute to the baroque flavour and richness of Kennelly's work. Their very confrontation gives *Cromwell* a grotesque, oniric, surreal quality without diminishing its radical seriousness while endowing it with the power of humour:

'Cromwell' I said, 'if our relationship
Is to develop, there's something I must tell
You, something from which I can't escape.
I hate and fear you like the thought of hell.
The murderous syllables of your name
Are the foundation of my nightmare.
I can never hate you enough. That is my shame.

Every day I pray that I may hate you more.
A fucked-up Paddy is what I am. Right?
Wrong. My loathing is such I know
I'll never rest.'
Oliver smiled. 'I sympathise with your plight,
Buffún. Understandable. You're fine, though, so
Long as you get it off your chest.'
'You really are an understanding
Son-of-a-bitch, Oliver' I replied...
(«A Relationship» 117)

Cromwell abounds, thus, in hybridism. Sarcasm accompanies pathos, grim irony gives way to the macabre. After being overawed and touched by the opening poem «A Host of Ghosts» (16) we are led to the circus of «Entertainment» (105). *Cromwell* is an example of Kennelly's dealing with the violence of his and Buffún's (that is, Ireland's) emotions. He has decided to laugh, even if the laughter becomes a grimace. If violence is everywhere, comedy can be equally powerful. Faced with the «horror pit», comedy necessarily turns black, but it can deflate, neutralise and thus, exorcise. In *Cromwell*, black comedy does not – because it cannot – soothe. However, intertwined with the sheer injustice of suffering it may well act as a cathartic agent: with it the poet goes a step beyond the paralysing power of pain, the traumatic experience of sanguinary history. It is not simply a question of parody. Kennelly has not chosen to turn his back on evil. On the contrary, he has looked it right in the face. The horror is then at the very core. But the poet's alternative to Conrad's «the horror, the horror», could be re-formulated, true to his own artistic temperament, as «*the horror, the laughter!*»

5. References

BROWN, Terence
1988 *Ireland's Literature*. Mullingar: The Lilliput Press and New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books.

CUSACK, Mary Frances
1868/1995 *An Illustrated History of Ireland (From A.D. 400 to 1800)*. Guernsey: Senate.The Guernsey Press..

FANNING, Aengus
2001 A glimpse of the poet. Conversation with Brendan Kennelly. *The Sunday Independent*, Dublin, 15th April, 2001.

GENTLES, Ian J.
1992 *The New Model Army in England, Ireland and Scotland, 1645-1653*. Oxford: Blackwell.

KAVANAGH, Patrick
1942 *The Great Hunger*. Reprinted in 1972 *Collected Poems*. London: Merlin Brian & O'Keefe.

KEARNEY, Richard

1997 *Postnationalist Ireland. Politics, Culture, Philosophy*. London & New York: Routledge.

KENNELLY, Brendan

1992 *Cromwell*.: Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books. (First published in Ireland, 1983).

1994 «Poetry and Violence». In: *Journey into Joy* (Selected Prose, edited by Ake Persson) Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books.

2001 *Glimpses*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books.

KIBERD, Declan

1995/1996 *Inventing Ireland. The Literature of the Modern Nation* London: Vintage Books.

LONGLEY, Edna (ed.)

1991 *Culture in Ireland. Division or Diversity*. Belfast: The Queen's University Press.

MORTON, A.L.

1938/1999 *A People's History of England*. London: Lawrence & Wisehart.

MUÑOZ SECA, Pedro

1918/2001 *La Venganza de Don Mendo*. Madrid: Editorial Castalia.

O'REILLY, Anthony

2002 The same boy from Kerry he was when he lived there, *The Sunday Tribune*, Dublin, 4th August, 2002.

PRAGA, Inés

1996 *Una Belleza Terrible. La Poesía Irlandesa Contemporánea (1940-1995)*. Barcelona: Promociones y Publicaciones Universitarias.

SCOTT SCOTT WHEELER, James

2000 *Cromwell in Ireland*. London: St. Martin's Press.

VILLACAÑAS, Beatriz

2003 *La Poesía de Juan Antonio Villacañas: Argumento de una Biografía*. Toledo: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Junta de Comunidades de Castilla-La Mancha.

VILLACAÑAS, Juan Antonio

1993 *Homenaje a la Lira en Larga Sobremesa con Luciano*. Toledo: Biblioteca Lírica. Gómez-Menor.