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'Blitzophrenia': Brendan Kennelly's Post-Colonial Vision

The poetry of Brendan Kennelly is principally characterized by various degrees and notes of resistance. From his earliest poems in the late 1950s to his latest collection *Martial Art* (2003), Kennelly has sought to establish a poetic independence that aggressively resists generic categorizations. At his corrosive best, Kennelly epitomizes a post-colonial Irish poetics that exists on the margins, eating away at a monolithic cultural centre by consistently voicing those whose very presence begins to erode the edifice of Irish identity. From the probings and musings of Oliver Cromwell to the carnal reflections of a bus-driving Black-and-Tan, Kennelly's poetry acts as a cultural correlative, highlighting the complex historical, social, and sexual undertones that are constantly seeking an elusive expression. While he eschews overt politicizations of his work there is a discernible politico-cultural forcefield within which his poetry appears to operate. Principally it involves often disturbing dialogues with a variety of both real and imagined characters who are free to explore their scapegoated roles in the fabrication of what Ernest Renan referred to as 'the spiritual principle' of the nation.[1] Kennelly's own description of 'Blitzophrenia' is the closest to a quasi-theoretical framework to which he will admit and it provides a searing and provocative lens through which an increasingly fragile and disparate contemporary Irish culture can be viewed.[2]

In 1991, Bloodaxe Books published a selection of Kennelly's poetry called *A Time for Voices* and this title can be viewed as a further explication of the blitzophrenic *modus operandi* favoured by Kennelly. The selection ranges over an incredibly productive thirty-year period (1960-1990) and Kennelly's feeling of poetic liberation through the articulation of a myriad of voices permeates the introductory note. He declares that the 'use of the first person is a great distancer' thus freeing him from a potentially claustrophobic relationship between the self and the articulated voice.[3] Consequently, the poems are suffused with many different voices 'many of them in vicious conflict' (*A Time for Voices*, p. 12) and this blitzophrenic device energizes the poems with an often ruthless passion. The self to which Kennelly refers is a diffracted, decentred, and deracinated entity, experiencing and expressing the *blitzkrieg* of, amongst others, history, childhood,

education, latent desires, and masked fears. Far from being the articulator of a secure personal voice, he portrays himself as the owner of a myriad of voices, writing in a state of blitzophrenia, juggling a multitude of personalites, both real and imagined, and struggling for some kind of expression in his poetry. Whatever consistent poetic voice emerges from this exhausting process is thus described by Kennelly: 'If there is "an authentic voice" it is found in the atmosphere deliberately created so that the voices of uncertainties may speaksing their individual stories' (*A Time for Voices*, p. 12).

In the introductory essay to *Irish and Postcolonial Writing — History, Theory, Practice*, Glenn Hooper appositely notes that a good deal of contemporary Irish literature operates within 'unstable and erratic' boundaries'.[4] The application of post-colonial theory to the complexities of the relationship between history and nationhood has led to the emergence of literary texts, according to Maria Tymoczko, 'that question, shift, subvert and recreate cultural norms, linguistic norms and poetics' (Hooper, p. 182). Within these mobile parameters, Brendan Kennelly's poetry ranges over the contemporary and the historical with little concern for the temporal integrity of either. The characteristics Buffun experiences in those around him, and the national characteristics to which he is exposed, elicit the connections with Cromwell and others in his dream-imagination. Two crucial questions now arise: if an individual can have such a vibrant, personal dream-imagination, could a collective national dream-imagination also exist and to what degree would it contain images and icons of nationhood? Terence Brown has noted the literary effects of this chronological and temporal distension: 'An art ... which eschews chronology is by definition a long way not only from the simple consolations and deceptions of narrative but also from any kind of stable text or unmixed mode'.[5]

It can also be argued that Kennelly's poetics, exemplified in *Cromwell*, offer a far more exciting and vivid picture of the manifestations of post-colonial theory than the theory itself. Glenn Hooper notes the importance and influence of Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical interventions and refinements of post-colonial theory in the 1990s; Kennelly, however, was exploring similar territory almost a decade previously. In his essay 'DissemiNation', for example, Bhabha states that the 'political unity of the nation' is predicated upon the formation of 'a signifying space that is archaic and mythical'[6] whereas in the first poem of *Cromwell*, Buffun, the central figure, observes that his concept of national identity is built upon 'a mountain of indignant legends, bizarre history, demented rumours and obscene folklore' (p. 15), all recognizable constituent elements of national mythologies.[7] Kennelly's eclectic and often surreal exploration of the role of Oliver Cromwell in

the formation of the Irish psyche takes him precisely to the liminal spaces Bhabha identifies as the sites of putative national signification. Indeed, in many instances in the collection, Buffun transcends both spatial and temporal boundaries in his exfoliation of self, witnessing, for example, the burning of dozens of houses by one of Cromwell's soldiers, Lieutenant Girders, noting in the process 'I was not born yet. But I suffer it' (p. 88). The freedom to roam at will through both his personal and national histories gives Buffun the practical opportunity to explore the contentious, liminal areas of Irish identity and to examine the originary moments of iconic figures in the Irish consciousness. Kennelly develops this investigative strategy in later epic collections, such as *The Book of Judas* and *The Man Made of Rain*, collections that interrogate the myriad manifestations of history and language and purport the necessity for some difficult and often disturbing self-analysis. Judas's acknowledgement early in the collection that 'the best way to serve the age is to betray it' (p. 17) clearly signals Kennelly's subversive poetic intent. Arguably, poetry accesses these liminal areas with a clarity and freshness that theory can only aspire to in that literary alterity provides a narrative structure, however fractured, in which complex theoretical suppositions crystallize into some form of tangible experience. This is hinted at by both Glenn Hooper and Colin Graham in their book *Irish and Postcolonial Writing* in which theories about the nature of Irish postcolonial thinking are thrown into sharp relief by studies of, amongst others, Maria Edgeworth, James Joyce, and Eavan Boland. It would appear that postcolonial theory has been greenhousing in Irish literature long before its heralded emergence in the 1980s.

This voicing of those traditionally excluded from cultural discourse has been highlighted by Colin Graham as one of the central features of post-colonial theory. The articulation of liminal phantasms crucially undermines the post-colonial desire for a cultural authenticity and Kennelly's use of this technique thus places him at the forefront of a post-colonial Irish poetics. Graham develops the argument that 'colonialism's initial denial of "authenticity" is at the root of the persistence of authenticity in Irish culture'.[8] Kennelly's poetry provides a crucial counter-narrative within this persistent drive for the elusive holy grail of Irish identity. Much as Ngugi Wa Thiong'o posits 'the historical reality of the neo-colony' in post-colonial Kenya, Graham writes that the failure of many post-colonial societies to recognize the legitimate rights and aspirations of subaltern groups, such as women and ethnic minorities, forces post-colonial theory to question the validity of a national identity that is based on exclusion.[9] He contends that post-colonialism resists the imposition of monolithic, cultural entities, such as the nation, and always questions the semiotic

field that is emitted by icons of national culture. Again the importance of the poetry of Brendan Kennelly in the development of a critical, post-colonial culture can be gauged by this assertion in that his work constantly resists the imposition of a single voice on the unharmonious choir of humanity.

In assessing the importance of the 'counter-tradition' in Irish literature, for example, Fintan O'Toole identifies two seminal texts, Patrick Kavanagh's 1942 epic *The Great Hunger* and Flann O'Brien's 'satire on the absurdity of Gaelic nationalist rural pieties', *The Poor Mouth*, which have succeeded in throwing light on the falsity of the image of the Irish nation favoured by both church and state.[10] While successive governments have retained, in O'Toole's parlance, 'a notion of a real, true, Ireland of nature and landscape and sturdy peasantry', a transformation through the gradual influence of predominantly American cultural iconography has led to a contemporary rural reality in which 'the thatched cottage has become a hacienda with Spanish arches and Mexican walls, the three-legged stool has become the corner seat in the lounge bar and Pegeen Mike has become Sierra Sue, making the notion of a Gaelic peasantry merely laughable' (p. 116). Crucially, the expression of identity in Kennelly's poetry is a painful process, littered with contradictions and tentative, uncertain assertions. The complexity of contemporary Irish identity is explored in *Cromwell* and a strong resistance to a dominant cultural discourse acts as a form of liberation for both Buffun and the poet. As Richard Kearney has noted about *Cromwell* 'by passing through the psychic purgatory of self-analysis, Kennelly is finally in a position to explore a utopian dimension of myth which points beyond the ruins of the past', and thus the poet is 'liberated into a positive ignorance, free to connect with foreclosed dimensions of being'.[11] It is these 'foreclosed dimensions of being' that post-colonial theory must focus upon because it is precisely in these centres of dislocation that a move beyond the limits of ideologies and hegemonic constrictions becomes feasible. If it is accepted that one of the central strategies of post-colonialism is the recovery of elided aspects of culture and the creation of structures of resistance, then Kennelly's poetry provides crucial, exploratory texts which constitute a counteraction all the more important for its uniqueness.

One of Kennelly's most effective poetic techniques is the utilization of a dream sequence, an especially fluid and flexible structure in which the often unarticulated certainties of personal and national identity can be explored in all their contradictions, abstractions, and confusions. He has explored this technique in a variety of collections including *Cromwell*, *The Book of Judas*, and *The Man Made of Rain*.[12] In the epic sequence *Cromwell*, for example, Kennelly employed a contemporary protagonist, Mr. M.P.G.M. Buffun, whose present waking memory and

unconscious dream-imagination are bombarded by troubling and claustrophobic images of the past. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud claims that 'all the material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience', a claim that validates the often surreal and brutal dreams that Buffun experiences.[13] The latter cannot, of course, have met Oliver Cromwell but has been taught to hate him to such a degree that this hatred has entered his waking memory, principally in childhood. Consequently, in his dreams, Buffun engages, not only with Cromwell, but with the dominant, formative influences in his life. He may have unconsciously forgotten many of these in his waking memory but they are given free expression in his dreams. Kennelly attempts to articulate what Freud refers to as the 'dream-imagination' (p. 84), a state of extreme liberation when the often restrained imagination 'leaps into a position of unlimited sovereignty' (p. 84), free from the control of his waking reason.

In fact, Freud's analysis of the dream-imagination provides an invaluable framework for exploring Buffun's complex and often surreal dreams. Freud argues that 'though dream-imagination makes use of recent waking memories for its building material, it erects them into structures bearing not the remotest resemblance to those of waking life; it reveals itself in dreams as possessing not merely reproductive but productive powers' (p. 84). Thus Buffun's various imaginings of Oliver Cromwell operating a taxi business in Kerry, Edmund Spenser as an alcoholic auctioneer, and William of Orange as a furniture polisher become plausible connections between the past and the present. Indeed, these connections are a key manifestation of the influence of history on contemporary existence in that imagined characteristics inherent in the historical figure become realized in the current representations of distinctive, national stereotypes. For example, in 1991, when manager Ron Atkinson infamously deserted Sheffield Wednesday, the football club to which he had sworn undying allegiance just twenty-four hours earlier, a tabloid headline contained just one word : 'Judas!'. Kennelly has written of this: 'Judas was in no position to write a protesting letter to that newspaper. How must men and women who cannot write back, who must absorb the full thump of accusation without reply, who have no voices because they are 'beyond hope', feel in their cold, condemned silence?' (*A Time for Voices*, p. 10).

Buffun's dreams are certainly pliant, agile, and versatile in their approach to, and treatment of, history. The supposed demons of Irish history, from Oliver Cromwell to William of Orange, are themselves freed by his dream-imagination into an environment where they can express opinions suppressed in the national waking memory and elided in the drive for an Irish national, cultural authenticity. Buffun,

too, is free to challenge or accept whatever version of history he pleases as he has been liberated from his reason-bound existence. Kennelly, therefore, allows a crucial contest over Irish national identity to take place in his dreams, an exploration that ranges over, amongst other crucial, national debates, the role of language, history, and religion in the colonial and post-colonial eras. The freedom to engage in dialogue that is strictly restricted in the waking memory is allowed full rein in the dream-imagination. However, Buffun's dreams also portray the immoderate, exaggerated, and monstrous constructions contained within the dream-imagination. The abstract nature of many of his dreams feed into his search for a more valid and disparate model of identity. Buffun, and Kennelly, are both in quest of those crucial, nodal points of connection between competing histories and interpretations. One of the most profound realizations within the text is the hopeless inadequacy of contemporary models of nationhood. Buffun arrives at the liberating precipice of non-identity, a state of constant flux in which the competing forces that have sought to mould him in their likeness are seen as manipulative, dogmatic, and politically-motivated phantasms. Indeed, this could also be deemed to be the ultimate goal of a post-colonial society, namely a liberation from the perceived ills and strictures of the past and the restrictive weight of these memories on the present. Buffun's identity, in parallel with national identity, is composed of many disparate internal voices and personalities, each contributing to what Freud refers to as 'external plastic pictures' (p.84), composite icons of identity that are based on internal intellectual and imaginative constructions. It is these 'external plastic pictures', artificial and pliant, that form the images and icons of nationhood and it is through an examination of the dream-imagination that a vital and creative deconstruction and revaluation of both the self and nation can take place.

One of the most enduring 'external plastic pictures' of Ireland was portrayed by Eamon de Valera after the end of the Second World War, when in response to Winston Churchill's thinly veiled criticism of the Free State's official neutrality, he declared that despite being 'clubbed into insensitivity' over 'several hundred years' Ireland 'stood alone against aggression' and emerged as 'a small nation that could never be got to accept defeat and has never surrendered her soul'.[14] This particular interpretation of history is, in K. Theodore Hoppen's words, 'at once the strength and the tragedy of nationalist Ireland's imprisonment within a special version of the past' and was a reading that could be found in the writings of both Joyce and Yeats (p. 185). Furthermore, it validates any action taken by the Free State government to define and preserve models of nationhood through its social, cultural, and political policies. Consequently, draconian censorship laws were introduced in the 1920s to

protect the cherished, perceived 'soul' of the nation from neo-colonial influences. Gradually, a politically dominated image of the nation emerged that equated conservative political policies with strict Catholic social and cultural mores. Catholic, rural, heterosexual, farming Ireland may have represented a good deal of real life in the Ireland of the 1940s but it was exploited to the extent that it became a fixed image in the national consciousness.

Kennelly sets out to explore a range of plastic pictures in *Cromwell* and it is in his dream-imagination that Buffun finds an uneasy freedom through the exfoliation of these dominant images. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the most significant outcomes of the adaptation of post-colonial theories to contemporary Irish culture is the realization of the pervasiveness of plastic images of national identity and nationhood. The global success of Riverdance and its various imitations serves to illuminate the tacky drive for a cultural authenticity at the heart of many current manifestations of Irishness, while the increasingly tangible and audible resistance to immigration is quickly unravelling cosily held illusions of a national 'Céad Míle Fáilte'. Will future African-Irish generations compose songs of their experiences in Ireland similar to our interminable dirges of life in the bars of New York and the building sites of London? While Buffun eschews an intrinsic connection with the over-arching concepts of the nation and nationalism, he explores the contradictory, liminal edges of perceptions of personal and national identity in pursuit of a liberation from the confines of a rigid and definable history. Stuart Hall has appositely described the ground upon which texts such as *Cromwell* rest:

> It (the past) is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence, but a positioning'.[15]

Indeed, Colin Graham has identified challenging ways in which post-colonial theory has begun to turn its attention to the deficiencies of the concept of 'nation' and his proposition that 'the attention which post-colonial theory pays to factors which disrupt, undermine and speak back to monolithic cultural constructions' identifies a space that can be occupied by a text such as *Cromwell*.[16] He contends that the idea of hybridity, as espoused by Homi Bhabha and Robert Young, allows the focus to rest on the interaction of cultures in the colonial paradigm rather than on the inevitable and predictable concept of division. Certainly, Kennelly's *Cromwell* elucidates the overlapping interrelationships that have occurred in Ireland's complex, colonial

experience and such an examination lends itself to a more inclusive and composite national identity. Buffun admits that he is composed of a myriad of selves, none of which is allowed to dominate. However, Graham warns that 'post-colonial theory must look at nationalism through its ideological histories and be aware of both its bases for construction and its claims to liberation', acknowledging that a post-colonial perspective should look beyond differences but, by incorporating difference into its model of national hybridity, not over-look them (p. 35). In *Cromwell*, Kennelly does not shirk from highlighting the violence committed by both sides in Ireland's sectarian conflicts and he certainly does not pretend that such palpable divisions can easily be overcome or even that they should be prevailed over. The move beyond these divisions involves acceptance rather than harmonization and is one of the most potentially liberating aspects of post-colonial theory.

In one of his recent collections, *Begin* (1999), Kennelly remembers Will Flint, a man he worked with on the buses in London in 1957. Flint had been a Black-and-Tan in Cork during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921) and Kennelly recalls a conversation:

> Having been reared
> to hate the thought
> of a Black-and-Tan
> the scum of England
> more beast than man
>
> I was somewhat surprised to find
> how much I liked Will Flint
> and his Black-and-Tan talk
> warming my heart and mind.[17]

Flint talks of the 'soft women of Buttevant' who 'opened up in style', suggesting a local complicity with the hated Black-and-Tans, which is rarely if ever discussed in the annals of Irish colonial resistance. Flint appears as an archetypal cockney who was 'ardly a man' when he was sent to Ireland to fight for 'King and Country'. He makes no apology for his undoubtedly violent actions and innocently regards his bus-driving job as a just reward for his service in Ireland. Much like Oliver Cromwell's footsoldiers, Flint appears to be an unwitting pawn in a larger plan, a young and gormless teenager who went to Ireland on a form of adolescent adventure. He does not appear to fit the bill of a ruthless, calculating Black-and-Tan, hated by all the Irish people with whom he came into contact. Resistance to his presence in Cork is certainly acknowledged as he notes 'I was lucky to get out alive' but,

in typical Kennelly fashion, the commonality of human experience is the overriding emotion rather than polarized perspectives on fixed versions of history.

Flint acts as a counter to the demonization of the Black-and-Tans in nationalist historiography while the violence and brutality for which he was partly responsible is also recognized. The voicing of the Other in Kennelly's post-colonial poetry does not elide the perception of the colonizers as greedy, violent, and arrogant oppressors, but crucially it widens the aperture through which iconographic people and events are viewed. This widening consequently begins to erode the mythology that inevitably attaches itself to the past, usually in the search for an identifiable, national authenticity and it is precisely through this methodology that Kennelly's poetry achieves its optimum critical effectiveness. In a manner akin to Benedict Anderson's analysis of the role of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in the establishment of the tangibility of the nation, Kennelly's poetry puts flesh on the bones and words of those whose lives and actions have contributed, in one way or another, to the construction of the invented collective identity. This is a vital component in the emergence of a critical counter-culture, and it mirrors Anderson's description of the 'sacrilege' involved in this process of voicing the unvoiced:

> No more arresting emblems of the modern culture of nationalism exist than cenotaphs and tombs of Unknown Soldiers. The public ceremonial reverence accorded these monuments precisely because they are either deliberately empty or no one knows who lies inside them, has no true precedents in earlier times. To feel the force of this modernity one has only to imagine the general reaction to the busybody who 'discovered' the Unknown Soldier's name or insisted on filling the cenotaph with some real bones. Sacrilege of a strange, contemporary kind![18]

Similarly, in *Culture and Imperialism* Edward Said defines the past as a 'shared memory', which, despite its conflictual nature, is nonetheless collective and therefore common to all traditions composing a particular national identity.[19] His use of the word 'texture' in relation to identity appears to coincide with R.F. Foster's idea of a national hybridity and cultural diversity as it relates to Ireland's post-colonial identity.[20] However, Said's notion of a shared memory raises a few pertinent questions. Who exactly shares this memory and is it not feasible that different social groups will have entirely different interpretations of 'the meaning of the imperial past'? Moreover, how is this 'shared memory' to be assessed and quantified? Kennelly's *Cromwell* exemplifies the fractured and dissonant nature of one

individual's confrontation with the 'shared memory' that suggests an inherent unity but which begins to unravel under closer scrutiny. Said implies that the era of high imperialism, namely the nineteenth century, continues to exert an influence on contemporary perceptions of national identity. It is interesting to note that it was during this specific period that Ireland was fully incorporated into the United Kingdom, through the Act of Union in 1801, and was technically no longer a colony of the empire but a constituent member of the colonial centre until the creation of the Free State in 1922. Therefore, the degree of acrimony over the interpretation of Ireland's colonial status could be directly related to the intensity of the union between the two countries and it is precisely this incorporation into the United Kingdom that poses so many questions about the nature of Ireland's colonial and consequent post-colonial status. What must be remembered is that despite its proximity to the colonial centre, Ireland definitely remained a colony during the nineteenth century, a fact attested to by the almost complete inaction of the British government during the catastrophe of the Great Famine of 1845-51.[21] On the other hand, however, Irish soldiers made a huge contribution to the British military machine during World War I with almost 150,000 enlisted by April 1916, ironically the month in which the Easter Rising took place.[22] Again these are examples of how Ireland appears to be simultaneously an integral part of, yet removed from, the colonial centre. It is a complex socio-political hybrid that eschews simplistic interpretations of its historical relationship with its colonial neighbour.

The notion that a form of nationalism emerges directly out of the colonial experience and indeed defines itself in the colonizer's terms raises a key issue in the debate on Ireland's difficult colonial identity. Opposition to the colonial regime in Ireland and other countries often stemmed from groups not readily classified as the colonial 'Other' but more recognizable as constituent elements of the colonial regime itself. These groups highlight the complexities of the colonial definition of identity in that they simultaneously appear to represent two rival traditions. Typically, Buffun is haunted by these rival claims and in a subtle poem, entitled 'Angers', he is harassed on the street by 'the terrible incestuous angers of Ireland'. He cannot remember if this occurred 'in the drab heart of Dublin' or 'Chiswick High Street' thereby cleverly dislocating a specific locus for post-colonial angst. He is 'ringed and harried' by 'the angers' and the effect is to transform 'the living' into 'shaken ghosts', the future nothing but 'a prison crammed with cowed nobodies and stammering haven't-beens' (p. 124). Buffun's sensitive and troubled soul is the post-modern battleground where an infinite number of squabbles, fights, disagreements, and intractable disputes is acted out, leading Buffun to the tired, yet liberating,

conclusion that 'though terrorised, I don't give a damn' (p. 158).

Kennelly captures the depth and consequences of the absorption of Ireland into the British colonial experience in *Cromwell*. Buffun is haunted by 'a host of ghosts' (p. 16), principal amongst them being Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658), an historical figure who elicited sustained revulsion in Ireland. Kennelly challenges this stereotype by giving Cromwell a voice and a platform from which he can attempt to explain himself and thus offer a rarely realized insight into one of the most important figures in the establishment of colonial Ireland. Personified as a butcher, Cromwell speaks to Buffun:

> I would remind you, returned the butcher, that you invited me here. I am the guest of your imagination, therefore have the grace to hear me out; I am not altogether responsible for the fact that you were reared to hate and fear my name which in modesty I would suggest is not without its own ebullient music. I say further that you too are blind in your way, and now you use me to try to justify that blindness. By your own admission you are empty also. So you invited me to people your emptiness. This I will do without remorse of reward. But kindly remember that you are blind and that I see (p. 15).

Kennelly's Buffun personifies the degree to which Ireland's colonial past impinges upon any subjective, contemporary perspective. Cromwell accuses Buffun of selectively using the past to justify his 'blindness', perhaps in a reference to the variety of difficulties faced by the post-colonial subject, paramount amongst which is the crisis created by the attempted definition of both personal and national identities. Buffun's personality, manifested in his dreams and waking memory, is composed of layers of history, prejudice, and fear. His imagination is a battleground where second-hand perceptions of history struggle for acceptance and the colonial past becomes an easy scapegoat for contemporary problems. Buffun asks himself a telling question which points not only to the multiplicity of traditions that compose Kennelly's perception of national identity but to the difficulty of disentangling these traditions in order to arrive at a more balanced self-perception:

> Do I believe myself?
> I spill my selves (p. 159).

In this couplet, from the penultimate poem in the collection, Kennelly comes closest to the essence, in as much as there is one, of the post-colonial subject. Buffun acknowledges that he is composed of a variety of competing identities, specifically what Kennelly refers to as

'blitzophrenia', a state of psychological bombardment in which the images, events, and people (both real and imagined) of the past engage in a desperate struggle for self-definition. Jonathan Allison describes Kennelly as having 'a faith in the poet as a monitor of vying and often contradictory impulses, as a locus of dialogue and conflict, and as a negatively capable articulator of uncertainty, rather than as the voice of faith and certainty',[23] a description that tallies closely with R.F. Foster's assertion that a post-colonial perspective on national identity entails being 'unsure of your foundations'.[24] Perhaps the key to Kennelly's and indeed any valid post-colonial perspective is the willingness to listen to, and engage with, the voice of the colonial Other, however disruptive and unsettling such a process might be.

In the course of the poem Kennelly clearly attempts to illustrate that the apparently binary oppositions of English and Irish, Catholic and Protestant, oppressor and oppressed, colonizer and colonized, can be viewed as inextricably linked in the dynamics of a fluid interchange of time, space, and individual identity. Indeed, despite his personal suffering and questioning, Buffun offers a way out of the potentially stifling atmosphere of Ireland's colonial and post-colonial identity crisis by loosening the rigidity of ideological stances and it is precisely this type of intellectual liberation that is offered in *Cromwell*. In 'Vintage', for example, Buffun reflects:

> 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 (p. 147).

Despite the apparent simplicity, this is one of the most significant acknowledgements by Buffun that he is moving towards a more pragmatic acceptance of the nature of history and society. He would appear to have transcended the blood that has spilled around him. He does not dwell on the reasons for the shedding of the blood but rather the universality of such atrocities. Everyone is guilty. Everyone has blood on his hands. This is a critical admission by Buffun and a sign that at least he is struggling to overcome the consequences of the violence and as such it is a crucial and significant point in the poem. There is a strong parallel to be drawn between his gradual and painful self-exploration and the necessary purging that a post-colonial society must undergo if it is to achieve even a partial self-awareness.

Cromwell's assertions that he was merely doing God's work, or that the massacre at Drogheda was designed to avoid further bloodshed, and personal characteristics such as the care and concern he feels for his children and his religious sincerity, are deliberately ignored and excluded from Irish nationalist historiography because each trait could

possibly be worked 'tenaciously through to the point where it threatens to dismantle the oppositions which govern the text as a whole'.[25] Add to this 'text' the atrocities carried out by Catholics on Protestants in 1641, exemplified in the brutal hanging of Rebecca Hill (p. 60), and the edifice of Oliver Cromwell begins to look a less secure foundational principle upon which to base a nationalist, political ideology. Through the interaction of Buffun and Cromwell the demonization of the latter becomes increasingly about Buffun's identity crisis than the reality of Cromwell's activities. It is, after all, Buffun who endures the nightmares and it is he who has to make sense of the past and not Cromwell, parallelling the responsibility placed on post-colonial societies vis-à-vis their colonial experience. Buffun even hopes that at the end of his terrifying odyssey he will be able to sit outside a pub with Cromwell 'sipping infinite pints of cool beer' (p. 117), a realization of his desire to come to terms with and accept the legacy of the past.

The freedom offered in *Cromwell* is the same freedom offered in certain elements of post-colonial discourse, namely through an engagement with what Kennelly refers to as the 'forbidden figures'[26] of the imagination, be it a stereotype of a Black-and-Tan or the ultimate manifestation of English colonial intent. By voicing these figures, Kennelly commits Benedict Anderson's 'sacrilege' through his depiction of the contradictions and hypocrisies at the heart of crucial, national cultural icons. His poems undermine and corrode the hegemonies that seek to paralyse debate about concepts of personal/national identity and as such are central to the emergence of a critical counter-culture. *Cromwell* is faithful to one of the central tenets of Kennelly's poetic outlook:

> There are few states as secure as living in the clichés and labels of religion and history. Ireland is, above all, the Land of Label, a green kingdom of clichés. To write poetry in Ireland is to declare war on labels and clichés. Needless to say, I find I have more than enough in my own heart and head, not to mention my language. But I try to fight them, to fight their muggy, cloying, complacent, sticky, distorting, stultifying, murderous and utterly reassuring embrace (*A Time For Voices*, p. 11).

The duplicitous nature of the many attempts to define an Irish national essence usually results in the elision of those aspects of national life that fail to match the required characteristics, leading to the obvious conclusion that these definitions are themselves dictated and driven by a preordained cultural agenda, be it political, social, or economic. Essentially what is being sought is an elusive cultural authenticity within which images of nationhood can be safely constructed and

which will provide a superstructure around which a larger image of nationhood can be constructed. This process can have potentially huge economic and political consequences, in the form of inward investment, political stability, and an ill-defined sense of national well-being. It can herald a bout of vigorous backslapping in which the phantasm of the nation can at last begin to enjoy the illusion of itself.

Homi K. Bhabha argues that 'what is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences' and within this remit lies an uncertain and embryonic note of resistance to the cultural monolith that seeks to sweep all before it.[27] Such moments and processes of resistance are notoriously elusive yet nonetheless hugely significant in the emergence of a more inclusive and less narrowly defined national identity. Bhabha identifies these moments of resistance as 'counter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries' (p. 300), indicating social, cultural, political and literary movements, or individuals, who seek not to explode a general myth of nationhood, but merely to articulate their own experiences and thus undermine the banalities and generalities that compose most attempts at national self-definition. However, the principal function of these acts of cultural sabotage is tentatively to suggest that nationhood is, in essence, above, beyond, or below definition. Concepts of nationhood begin to collapse when the gargantuan mass of humanity that composes even the smallest nation is exposed in all its contradictions and vicissitudes. Ideas of cultural uniqueness begin to look absurd in the face of the commonality of human experience while iconographic, cultural juggernauts, such as religion, language, and history, are exposed as the bricks and mortar of an interpreted edifice of national identity which, when the grouting is chipped away, begins to look remarkably like an Irish version of the tower of Pisa, weighed down from within by its inherent contradictions. Brendan Kennelly's poetry provides a clear and powerful exposition of these crucial, cultural fissures.

NOTES
1. Ernest Renan, 'What is a Nation', in *Nation and Narration*, edited by Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 18.
2. Private unpublished correspondence, 1 April 1996. Letter in possession of current author.
3. Brendan Kennelly, *A Time For Voices — Selected Poems 1960-1990* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), p. 12.
4. *Irish and Postcolonial Writing — History, Theory, Practice*, edited by Glenn Hooper and Colin Graham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 18.

5. Terence Brown,'Kennelly as Novelist', in *Dark Fathers Into Light — Bloodaxe Critical Anthologies*, edited by Richard Pine (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994), p. 53.

6. Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 300

7. Brendan Kennelly, *Cromwell* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe Books: 1987).

8. Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland — Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 141.

9. Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (London: James Curry, 1986), p. 10.

10. See Fintan O'Toole, 'Going West: The Country versus the City in Irish Writing', *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies (1982-85)*, edited by Mark Patrick Hederman and Richard Kearney (Dublin: Folens, 1987), p. 116

11. Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 140.

12. Brendan Kennelly, *The Man Made of Rain* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bloodaxe Books: 1998).

13. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpetation of Dreams*, edited and translated by J. Strachey (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1954), p. 11. All subsequent references will be noted in parentheses.

14. Quoted in K. Theodore Hoppen, *Ireland Since 1800, Conflict and Conformity* (Harlow: Longman, 1989), p. 186.

15. Stuart Hall, 'Cultural identity and Diaspora', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), p. 395.

16. Colin Graham, 'The Irish "Post-"?' A Reply to Gerry Smyth, *Irish Studies Review* 13 (1995/6), 33-36 (p. 34). Further references will be noted in parentheses.

17. Brendan Kennelly, *Begin* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1999), p. 68.

18. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), p. 9.

19. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993), p. 11.

20. R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland : 1600-1972* (London: Allen Lane, 1993), p. 596.

21. For discussions of the causes and management of the Great Famine see Cormac O'Gráda, *Ireland — An Economic History 1780–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 187-199.

22. R.F. Foster, p. 471.

23. See 'Cromwell: Hosting the Ghosts', in *Dark Fathers Into Light*, p. 68.

24. From a transcript of an interview with the current author held at Hertford College, Oxford, 20 March, 1996

25. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 133.

26. Brendan Kennelly, *Breathing Spaces* (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, p. 11.

27. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 1-2.