

ANTICIPATING THE PEACE PROCESS: *IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER* AS A MYTH-BREAKING MESSAGE

Yann Bévant

In the Name of the Father was first released on cinema screens in 1993. Jim Sheridan's film is directly inspired by the story of Gerry Conlon, a young Northern Irish Catholic who was unjustly sentenced and imprisoned together with his father for the murder of five people in an IRA bomb attack in 1974. The case went far beyond the mere question of the individuals concerned to become emblematic of a conflict in which, to many Irish eyes, British institutions played a bad part. Furthermore, there is also the symbolic aspect of the timing of the film's release, as it coincided with that of the Downing Street Joint Statement, which was a stepping stone for the Peace Process in Northern Ireland. The following analysis rests on two essential aspects of the notion of conflict, a notion which constitutes the central question in the film.

The first aspect is the conflict between Gerry Conlon, a marginal, unimportant character, and the judicial and police system. This conflict serves as a metaphor of the Irish nationalist struggle which eventually goes beyond the mere Northern Irish context to reach out to a never-ending conflict between two nations, in which 'The Troubles' in Northern Ireland are but the latest development. This historical context makes up the wall the film's main character stumbles against. So it could be yet another film about Irish grievances against the 'Brits' carrying an unreconstructed Irish Republican message, and many critics like Conor Cruise O'Brien or Richard Grenier readily jumped to such a conclusion. The story actually suggests a more sophisticated message as, by playing the rules of the game in a system he initially rejects, Gerry Conlon eventually breaks down the wall of mistrust and misunderstanding and does so thanks to somebody who apparently belongs to the other side, an English lawyer.

The second aspect is a logical development of the first. Gerry's predicament cannot be reduced to a struggle against a hostile world; it has much to do with the choices he has to make, not only as an individual but also as a kind of go-between, as he is both heir to the weight of past history and builder of a future which may take a different shape according to the way he acts.

As mentioned above, Jim Sheridan's film is based on a true story, which remained a bone of contention in Anglo-Irish relations for many years. In October and November 1974, the Provisional IRA bombed two pubs in Guildford and Birmingham, England. The attacks triggered violent anti-Irish feelings in British public opinion. As a result, the *Prevention of Terrorism Act* was rushed through Parliament. For the first time since its promulgation the new law made it possible to suspend the *Habeas Corpus*

Act (a law prohibiting imprisonment without charge and without access to a lawyer) for a maximum period of seven days in cases connected with terrorism. It is under the provisions of this piece of legislation that several Irish people were arrested and jailed, thereby becoming the ideal suspects. After having been bullied into confessing crimes they had not committed, they became at the same time the perfect scape-goats and the best evidence of the efficiency of the police and of British courts. In the following years, the fate of the so-called Guildford Four and Birmingham Six became increasingly important in Anglo-Irish relations, all the more since, in spite of new evidence, the British stubbornly rejected any retrial of the convicted men. The campaign in favour of a revision of the trial gained momentum, became an international issue and eventually culminated in the retrial of the Guildford Four in 1989 and of the Birmingham Six in 1991 and the subsequent release of them all.

By choosing to make a film on such a topic, Sheridan does not only tell a story based on facts, nor does he simply describe a particular aspect of the bitter relationship between the British (and more particularly the English) and the Irish, i.e. the harm done to the latter by the colonial and condescending attitude of the former. What Sheridan tries to do is to provide analysis and meaning in what could have been merely a terrible blunder but had actually become one of the most powerful myths in the recent history of Anglo-Irish relations. The cases of the Guilford Four and the Birmingham Six encapsulated a number of difficult issues: the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland and the status of the Province, the claim by the British authorities that they were neutral in the conflict between the two northern Irish communities and that Britain was but "an honest broker."¹ Furthermore the 'episode' lasted for years, which contributed to a dramatisation of what was at stake; to many Irish minds, the individuals who had been convicted became symbols of British prejudice.

In short, something which in different circumstances could have been interpreted as a malfunction leading to a serious judicial mistake calling for redress attracted attention because it had been elevated to the status of myth, and the ideological contamination springing from such a status made any tentative step towards a critical attitude next to impossible – not only on the British side. From an Irish perspective, the case took the value of a Great Historic Test: Would the British eventually prove able to acknowledge past mistakes and redress not only the wrongs in the case, but adequately address Irish historic grievances generally? Jim Sheridan's message goes even a step further asking questions like: What about us, the Irish people? Are we capable of overcoming our own prejudices in our relation to Britain and the British, particularly when the North is at stake? Can we get over the old shibboleths of Irish nationalism and drop the posture of victims and martyrs, which is after all nothing but the anticipated response of the colonised to the coloniser? The purpose of the film is not to provide a documentary, nor even a screen adaptation, as Rob

1 The term was used by Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland such as Sir Patrick Mayhew and Peter Brooke.

Ritchie and Mike Beckham had done with Chris Mullin's book on the case. The aim of the film is to take a critical and introspective stand on the nature of the response that must be made to a denial of justice, mythologised into the perfect representation of the constant process of victimisation in Anglo-Irish relations, a process which in turn makes self-defence legitimate.

The story of Gerry Conlon as told by Sheridan reveals a double quest. Gerry, in a very existentialist, Sartrean way, is thrown into the world, and his life does not make sense. He first appears as an actor in a story which initially seems largely beyond his grasp. This first quest, the quest for meaning and self-assertion, the translation from object to subject, leads him to political commitment and to following in Joe McAndrew's² tracks. Gerry Conlon, however, soon finds out that McAndrew's truth is no better than that of the 'Brits' he rejects and that the IRA man responds exactly as he is conditioned to do by the myth he lives in. In other words, if Gerry Conlon really wants to set himself free, he has to break free from the deterministic attitudes generated by the myth. From then on, his campaign for rehabilitation in the name of his father appears first of all as a quest to destroy the illusions that keep him and his likes mentally imprisoned. By getting rid of a conditioned response that only keeps the vicious circle going (McAndrew's example) and by showing the inadequate nature of the representations created by the myth (not all English people are prejudiced or unreliable; Irish people are not violent by nature; to be true to the fathers does not necessarily imply the way of the gun, and what seemed to be solid facts are eventually exposed as lies and forged evidence), Sheridan's main character brings down the myth itself and sets the future free.

From Outcast to Rebel

The story starts *in medias res*, as we are introduced to an already convicted and jailed Gerry Conlon. He is telling his story to an English woman – and we will learn at a later stage that she is his lawyer and will manage to re-open the case for a new trial. This introduction allows us to discover Gerry's former life. Gerry is no romantic hero, nor even an activist. He is a petty thief who has no true faith. He has no hesitation when it comes to lying, even to family and friends. Aunt Maggie declares: "He is no angel," and his father asks: "Are you going to be a liar and a thief all your life?" In fact, Gerry is adrift more than that he is a malevolent character. By playing the baddie, he does at least exist in his own eyes as well as in his father's. This is revealed by the conversation he has with his father in the cell: "That's when I started to rob to prove that I was no good [...] then I knew I was bad [...] I started to tell lies [...] you know what that means: words don't mean anything." Paradoxically, Gerry's speech highlights the symbolic importance of words and therefore of representations, as he himself claims that his behaviour was in the first place conditioned by his

2 The IRA activist he meets while in jail.

father's statement. By becoming an unreliable petty thief, Gerry seems to try and conform to his father's words, as a person of faith would do with regard to the word of God. Such a situation obviously heralds the two quests that await Gerry.

Up to his arrest by the security forces Gerry is unable to bring meaning to his life, which seems governed by the whims of fate. It is by mistake that soldiers believe he is a sniper on the roof at the beginning of the film and that he is the cause of the riot. It is by chance that he finds himself in the IRA hiding place, and this is the reason why he has to flee to Britain to avoid being knee-capped by the paramilitaries. Once in England, it is by chance again that he meets Jim Deptford and that he robs money in a prostitute's flat, and both events will have terrible, adverse effects during the trial. Sartre was evoked earlier on, and a parallel with Albert Camus' main character in *L'Étranger* could also be made at this stage: Just like Meursault, Gerry is the toy of a series of unpredictable events over which he has no control and he ends up in jail. Contrary to Camus' hero, Gerry is, however, not sentenced to death, but, by voicing his disappointment that the death penalty is no longer available, the judge who condemns him echoes the hatred of the public attending the verdict. To a large extent, Meursault's and Gerry's predicaments are quite comparable, but there is something more in Gerry's case. He and his friends are found guilty of a crime they never committed. After the trial, his father prophetically remarks: "At least you told the truth in there. That will stand you."

Gerry's awareness is progressive. At the beginning of his term in jail, he is still a character without direction, whose life is as fragmented as the big jigsaw of the West Indian man with whom he takes drugs. The motif of the jigsaw, a map of the British Empire, and the very character of the West Indian, yet another colonised subject, are reminders of Gerry's own condition and sense of guilt. Broken by other people's notions of them, both men seem at a loss and unable to stand for what they truly are. As Martin McLoone aptly remarked: "This is the problem of cultural imperialism, the colonisation of the unconscious in which [...] the colonised culture can finally only recognise itself in the image promoted in the first instance by the colonising culture" ("National Cinema" 152-53). Yet the scene of the jigsaw is the starting point of Gerry's evolution. The insert shot on the jig-saw representation of the broken Empire, the sarcastic remarks of the wardens, the open hostility of the English prisoners who call Gerry and his father "Irish bastards," all this leads Gerry to see what he did not want to see when he was in the hippie community, in spite of Jim Deptford's attitude and in spite of Charlie Burke's ominous statement that whatever he may say or do the fact that he belongs to the Northern Irish Catholic community sticks to him as a second skin and is the main – negative – marker of his identity in English eyes. From the moment he accepts such a definition of himself, Gerry finds what he thinks is his place in the world. He becomes a political animal, and the petty thief vanishes. He used to live on the fringe of a system, a system that he now rejects for ostensibly ideological reasons. Contrary to his father, he does not want to appeal against the judgement, because he has no confidence in the British judicial system, or in the

British generally. At this stage, Gerry is not aware that he is falling into another trap and that he is still conforming, though in another way, to the image of the colonised. He has only moved from one representation of the myth – the defeated and crushed colonised native – to another, which reads like an oxymoron – the colonised rebel. A dialogue between his father, Giuseppe Conlon and Joe McAndrew is particularly relevant of this stage:

Giuseppe – For God sake will you stop all this?
Joe – You're weakening my position Giuseppe.
Giuseppe – It will end in violence.
Joe – Good.
Giuseppe – What's good about that?
Joe – That's all they understand.

This conversation makes sense in diegetic terms, but it also hints at old contentious issues in the history of Anglo-Irish relations. It brings back to mind, among other things, the famous Treaty of Limerick, signed in 1691. That the British government should not respect a Treaty, that is to say the rule of law by which they initially vowed to abide, was something the Irish republican movement, in various periods and most notably up to the late twentieth century, considered as the best proof that only the balance of strength – and therefore violent means – had a bearing on the attitude of the British authorities. Joe McAndrew's republican cue obviously echoes this long-standing argument, but Sheridan is certainly not satisfied with this rather Manichean vision of things. If his film makes no concession and underlines the actual failures and responsibilities of the British, it also calls for a deep and genuine reassessment of traditional Irish viewpoints. Consequently, Gerry's new political awareness confronts him with another deadly trap. By accepting the perception of others as a way of defining his own identity, Gerry may well again conform to what is expected of him – as when his father saw him as a petty thief – and become just like Joe McAndrew. Contrary to Giuseppe Conlon, McAndrew is ready to retaliate, and he triggers off a fight in the prison. Later on, he organises a militant protest which is harshly repressed, and he takes revenge on chief warden Barker by burning him severely during a film session.³ This episode is concluded by Gerry's voiceover: "Barker was maimed for life and Joe was sent to another prison. He is in solitary confinement somewhere. We've had no news of him since then. The new chief screw had the yard painted and I was back walking in circles again."

The episode and its conclusion are quite telling. McAndrew's hatred is exactly what Dixon expects on Gerry's face during the beat-up. When he reacts as a rebel who does not hesitate to use his companions as instruments to serve his cause and when he resorts to ruthless violence, McAndrew conforms to the mythologised representation of the Irish barbarian expected by members of the British security forces such as Dixon, but also by the regular Englishman in the street such as the one who

3 The spectator cannot but notice the intertextuality of the scene, as the film on screen is Coppola's *The Godfather*.

shouts "hang the Irish bastard" during the trial. The fresh circles of paint followed by the picture of the prisoners in the prison ward have a symbolic function: when repression backfires and violence considered legitimate by the prisoners erupts, revolt is justified and then calls for more repression. As an activist McAndrew becomes for a while Gerry's surrogate father, because Gerry is a newborn political animal. But McAndrew's blind violence and eventual failure accelerate Gerry's awareness that violence only calls for more violence and that the vicious circle built by the myth will not bring down the prison walls.

Articulating a Myth-Breaking, Post-Colonial Discourse

The prison context also leads Gerry to re-examine the set of relationships he entertains with his father as well as to reassess his father's words. At the beginning of the film Gerry refuses to listen to his father, who in the Belfast context is actually often at pains to make himself heard. Yet, in prison, Giuseppe's importance becomes obvious. He becomes a central character in the story because he acts as a go-between, and we realise that from the very start he has played such a part: by talking to the local commander he prevents his son from being knee-capped by the IRA, and one scene at the beginning announces Giuseppe's line of action in prison: during the riot we see him between the security forces and the mob, trying to calm things down. Both in the scene of the riot and with the IRA Giuseppe gets what he wants through talk. Giuseppe actually goes beyond appearances: when he communicates with the wardens, it is because he can see the human beings beyond the agents of the system. When the prisoners are playing in the snow, Gerry's voiceover expresses surprise at the fact that Giuseppe seems indifferent to the news concerning his call for an appeal. But the spectator knows what Giuseppe is interested in, what is shown at that very moment: he is watching one of the wardens feeding a pigeon, and the scene we can see through Giuseppe's eyes restores the man's inner humanity. As the poet Panait Istrati said, beauty is in the eye of the man who knows how to watch; and the scene strongly suggests that Giuseppe refuses to close his mind, thereby expressing his refusal to be stripped of his own human dignity. This is what he wants Gerry to understand when he points at his head and says: "All they've done is black out the light. They can't black out the light in here."

To Giuseppe, maintaining his humanity consists in the first place in refusing to reduce other human beings into mere objects. This is why he cannot support McAndrew's strategies in spite of the wrong done to him, and this explains why, in the strongest terms, he condemns the vicious attack on Barker. Giuseppe, in short, rejects fate, but he also rejects concepts and ideas that go against human dignity. In this respect, he appears not only as McAndrew's antithesis, but also as a guide who shows Gerry the way forward. He is a torchbearer and one who cannot be deceived by illusions like the men in Plato's cave.

The dying Giuseppe eventually passes on the torch to his son, and three scenes in the film perfectly illustrate Gerry's take-over. First, the scene when the two men face each other, hands on cheeks in a mirror-like attitude. Gerry no longer turns his back on his father as he was shown doing many times at the beginning of the film. Then, a second significant scene takes place when Giuseppe gives his son a tape-recorder and tells him: "you're a good talker. Talk." Giuseppe symbolically passes on his own weapon to Gerry, and encourages him to keep his words in memory. By telling his story in his own words, Gerry will free his individual history from external interpretation and from appropriation by others. It is a double act of liberation. Last but not least, the scene of Giuseppe's death: Giuseppe is asleep and breathes loudly, while Gerry is smoking a cigarette in his bed. The cigarette goes off, and Gerry has to use his lighter. As the light appears, Giuseppe ceases to breathe. This scene harbours a strong symbolic connotation, which is dramatically echoed in the next one, when prisoners throw blazing pieces of paper out of the windows: the walls of the prison cannot contain Giuseppe's light, the bearer of which is now Gerry.

Gerry, thus, carries on his father's legal fight. The words he speaks when he meets Gareth Pierce are revealing of the change in the nature of his quest: "I'd never thought I could trust an English person again, especially a lawyer." Later on, Gerry tells her: "My Da always saw the good in people. He recognized it in you the minute he saw you Gareth." Now Gerry himself can see the woman behind the lawyer. Like his father, he is now able to go beyond appearances and to consider human beings in their full dimension.

At this stage, it could be argued that films on Ireland and Northern Ireland advocating the use of peaceful means to solve the conflict have been numerous and that Sheridan consequently breaks no new ground but simply follows in their footsteps. Films such as *Shake Hands with the Devil*, *The Gentle Gunman*, or, more recently, *Patriot Games*, all denounce violence as a dead end. Yet the argument does not hold, as the vast majority of the films carrying such a message in the last 50 years were not shot from an Irish nationalist perspective, but from a British or American point of view. Sheridan is perfectly clear about where he speaks from. He has his hero say: "I can't forget what they did to my family, I just can't forget." After the appeal and the release of the prisoners, Gerry also declares:

I am an innocent man. I spent fifteen years in prison for something I didn't do. I watched my father die in a British prison for something he didn't do. And this government still says he is guilty. I want to tell them that until my father is proved innocent, until all the guilty ones are brought to justice, I will fight on, in the name of my father and of the truth.

Just like the main protagonist in his film, Jim Sheridan has voiced his conviction that it was necessary to free speech in order to free the truth; in other words to break free from the conventional and imposed representations so as to genuinely reassess on both sides the totality of Anglo-Irish relationships. It is only if such a condition is fulfilled that the sacrificed generations will rest in peace in the eyes of future gene-

rations; that wounds will begin to heal and that a process of reconciliation will be made possible. Sheridan clearly makes his point in an interview available with the video release of the film: "It was just a way to say you're old-fashioned, get over, evolve." Sheridan's remark was aimed at all sides, and his point was repeated, though in less challenging terms, in 1994: "Liberation is only possible if all sides of the conflict examine their actions [...] and change" (Mansfield 7).

Such positioning also has an additional merit: it hints at the limited influence of Hollywood codes on Sheridan's work. Many critics have also pinpointed the difference between American and British traditions when it comes to representing Ireland on the screen (e.g. Caughie, Rockett and Hill). The American tradition, beginning with *The Lad from Old Ireland*, shot by Sydney Olcott in 1910, borrows the linear pattern, popularised by westerns, and privileges optimistic endings. The main counter-example would be John Ford's *The Informer*, released in 1935, which resorts to expressionist techniques. Sheridan, however, stops short of actually affixing a Hollywood culture stamp on *In the Name of the Father*. Though the narrative is undoubtedly closer to the American tradition than to the British one, its ideological content is difficult to relate to either of them. Sheridan's film does not revel in the superiority of American values, as is often the case with American-made films on Ireland, from the above-mentioned *The Lad from Old Ireland* to *The Devil's Own* and *Far and Away*, to name but a few. A number of themes present in the film are likely to appeal to American audiences: free will versus determinism and the importance of individual self-assertion, for instance. Yet, the film was not primarily made for an American audience, nor even for an Irish-American audience revelling in nostalgia for old Erin. Basically, Jim Sheridan knows the recipes to make sure that his films will reach large audiences, and he uses them to Irish ends. To reach out to international audiences is a way of popularising his message, and to do so Jim Sheridan borrows American cinematic codes, which are familiar to international audiences because of the influence of Hollywood cinema world-wide, and fills them with concepts inherited from his own European and post-colonial background. Thus, in her book *L'image et son interprétation*, French academic Martine Joly reminds the reader of the importance of Barthes' theory of myth as revisited by Pierre Bourdieu and underlines that to Bourdieu it is essential to understand myth as a doxa that must be fought by analysing and understanding the mechanisms through which it is produced and imposed on people. This is exactly Jim Sheridan's line of argument in *In the Name of the Father*, and the originality of the film partly rests on its hybridity: its signifiers are to a large extent American, its signified belongs to something else that could be interpreted as post-colonial thinking applied to Ireland and to Anglo-Irish relations.

To conclude, *In the Name of the Father*, far from exonerating the British from any responsibility for the violence experienced by the North of Ireland, pinpoints the major importance of their historical involvement and its contemporary consequences. Through his film, Sheridan calls for a genuine reassessment not only of the British presence in Ireland, but also of traditional British views on the Irish, which, because

they are biased, prevent change. But the film also claims that Irish nationalist violence is counterproductive and as Manichean as British prejudices and only serves to reinforce and legitimise the oppressive character of British-Irish relations, at least as far as the North is concerned.

Gerry eventually reaches self-respect by getting rid of his sense of guilt and by recovering his self-confidence as an Irishman and his dignity as a human being, both identities being intrinsically interwoven in a post-colonial context.⁴ He has understood that the main responsibilities are borne by other people, that is the British, and as long as they refuse to admit such a fact, the struggle will go on. Hence the football metaphor: "they fouled the fucking ball, Gareth, they fouled the fucking ball and they are as guilty as sin," which is also a reminder of his own sense of guilt about the football medal. But he has now learnt that such a struggle, contrary to the example provided by McAndrew, can have a victorious outcome only if blind hatred fed by the mythologised representations of the Other is destroyed for good.

Another way therefore exists for Gerry and those of his generation, and if they follow this new path they will manage to free themselves and assert their legitimate identity. Such a way is made possible because there is no inevitable fate in Anglo-Irish relations, as the character of Gareth Pierce shows, and change is a matter of political will. The film went public in 1993, the year of the Downing Street declaration. The joint statement by Prime Minister John Major and Taoiseach Albert Reynolds explicitly put an end to years of criminalisation of the Republican movement and paved the way for a negotiated settlement of the conflict in the North. This political watershed was followed some years later by Tony Blair's apologies in the name of the British State for British responsibilities in the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century in Ireland and in the sufferings endured by the Irish at the time.

Through a metaphorical and post-colonial reading of Gerry Conlon's story, *In the Name of the Father* remarkably manages to grasp and herald the oncoming ideological transformations in the relations between Nationalist, and more particularly Republican Nationalist, Ireland and the British State, thus bringing an important contribution to the understanding of a historical myth-building process, the source of noxious

4 Again we can quote a number of significant exchanges:

Giuseppe – I want you to have respect

Gerry – Respect for who

Giuseppe – For yourself

...

Giuseppe (to Gerry) – You're better off being guilty

...

Gareth – It's not the stairs that are killing your father Gerry

Gerry – Why, what is it then?

Gareth – It's your lack of faith

Gerry – Faith in what?

Gareth – In yourself

stereotypes and false representations that poisoned Anglo-Irish relationships up to the end of the twentieth century.

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