



## **PAST IMPERFECTS – PRESENT IMAGININGS: (RE)MAKING HISTORY**

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In 1994, when his study on *Contemporary Irish Drama* was published, Anthony Roche was introducing his chapter on Northern Irish Drama in the following terms:

*Since conflict is the essence of all drama, it should be no surprise that the current situation in Northern Ireland has generated a considerable number of stage plays. Catholic versus Protestant, British versus Irish, republican versus loyalist, the gun versus the ballot box: to live in the North is to inhabit a drama of conflict whose contradictions often result in lethal consequences. (Roche, 1994: 216)*

If Roche was referring here to the interconnectedness between the theatrical stage and the political violence of the last twenty-five years that had become an all too inevitable sight in Northern Irish culture, the origins of the oppositional patterns referred to above lies with the historical England-Ireland axis and the fact of colonialism, which, from David Cairns and Shaun Richards' perspective, has inflected the making and remaking of the Irish identity by positing it as England's other, to the extent to which "no aspect of identity [...] can safely be assumed to be inherent" (Cairns and Richards, 1988: 8). This proves Declan Kiberd's assertion, that "it was less easy to decolonise the mind than the territory" (Kiberd, 1996: 6), because the clusters of imagery evolved by each community for self-representation tend to fall into two categories: on the Protestant side, the basic opposition established by the colonial discourse between self and other, recast as that between civilisation and wilderness remains central, and the conflict is explained by reinforcing the stereotype of the irrational and violent Catholic, who has failed to accept the democratic will of the majority. On the Nationalist divide, violence becomes heroism, and 'terrorist' is replaced by 'freedom-fighter', by means of the reciprocity principle secured by a long list of historic ills perpetrated against the natives by their oppressors, which require redress in the present, the 'inspiration' being provided by the actions of legitimated heroes, from Cuchullain to Connolly (Buckley, 1991: 261).

If history, or better said, its versions of the past remain obsessively afresh in reinforcing loyalties and asserting identities, one should not forget that, to quote John Berger's opinion:

*History always constitutes the relation between a present and its past. Consequently, fear of the present leads to mystifications of the past. The past is not for living in: it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act. Cultural mystification of the past entails a double loss. Works of art are made unnecessarily remote. And the past offers us fewer conclusions to complete in action. (Rabey, 1986: 188)*

Among other Northern Irish playwrights, Brian Friel has, so far, provided the most coherent commitment to the investigation of "the established opinions, myths and

stereotypes which had become both a symptom and a cause of the current situation” (Ireland’s Field Day, 1985). As co-founder of the Field Day Theatrical Company in 1980, Friel offered in his own *Translations* an alternative way “of looking at Ireland, or another possible Ireland” (Gray, 1995: 8; Andrews, 1995: 165). Set in 1833, at the time when the Ordnance Survey resulted in the translation of the Gaelic place-names into English, *Translations* turned the historical event into a dramatic metaphor able to comment on present-day Anglo-Irish relations, while, at the same time, it brought into discussion the traditional nationalist myth of “the cultural dispossession by the British” (McAvera, 1985). Though a historical play, *Translations* foregrounded striking contradictions to the mythology of colonialism through reversed stereotyping, psychological character depth, instances of meaningful openness to the ‘other’ that asserted the possibility of crossing the boundaries, and a basically optimistic ending, which suggested the desirability of cultural fusion between the Gaelic and English traditions. As such, the Frielian text succeeded in “re-making” history for the contemporary audience, and in this manner an imagined past became meaningful for the present.

If, starting with its premiere, *Translations* has met with much acclaim, sometimes controversy, but an overall impressive host of critical commentary, the same cannot be said about the other historical play written in the 1980s, *Making History* (1988)<sup>1</sup>, to which Anthony Roche’s study of *Contemporary Irish Drama* devotes only a passing, and unjustly disqualifying remark that reads: “Friel’s much awaited *Making History*, his first new play in six years, was a disappointment” (Roche, 1994: 224). That *Making History* was not a “disappointment” can be proved by the fact that Declan Kiberd names it among his selected triumvirate of Frielian plays to appear in the synopsis of contemporary Irish literature with which his study concludes (Kiberd, 1996: 633-4).

As a new attempt at writing a historical play, *Making History* may have been prompted by Kevin Barry’s remarks on the interaction between history and fiction on which the latter was basing his appraisal of *Translations*:

*It is certain that both history and fiction imagine and structure a past which neither could make known without sharing the images and structures of narrative. Both discourses enable the entry into what has been lost into a society’s understanding of its present. (Friel, Barry, Andrews, 1983: 119)*

As Friel himself has confessed in an interview, the writing of a historical play presents the apparent advantage of dealing with established historical facts that lend accessibility to the work, but also imposes particular responsibilities for the writer, “to acknowledge those facts . . . but not to defer to them” (Friel, Barry, Andrews, 1983: 123-4). Consequently, *Making History* acknowledges the ‘facts’ of the recorded histories of Hugh O’Neill, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Baron of Dungannon and the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Tyrone, the leader of the Irish forces in the last Gaelic rebellion against the English colonisation of Ulster at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. An adept politician and gifted soldier, O’Neill made the most both of his position as a representative of the English Crown which had secured him the granting of an English earldom in 1585, as he did ten years later in the Rising of the Northern Earls, when he became known among his European Catholic contemporaries as the “Prince of Ireland”. Nevertheless, the action of *Making History* condenses the events bridging O’Neill’s marriage to the English Mabel Bagenal in 1591 to the aftermath of Kinsale into a momentous episode lasting less than two years, in which the points of reference are: O’Neill’s reciprocated love for Mabel (Act I, Scene 1), his facing the option of turning into the leader that would coalesce a national resistance (Act I, Scene 2), and the anguished

confession of repentance written to the Queen when a fugitive in the Sperrin mountains (Act II. Scene 1). A coda set twenty years later (Act II. Scene 2) shows O'Neill, now an exile in Rome, endlessly returning to the same incidents of his life as the only means of preserving some sense of 'truth' for his existence: "That is the truth. That is what happened" (66). This final scene discloses that what the play has enacted so far were the flashbacks of O'Neill's mind, engaged in a kind of Yeatsian "dreaming back" of a selective and subjective record of his life.

Throughout the play, O'Neill's personal history is juxtaposed with the official record of his life, exemplified by Peter Lombard's *De Regno Hiberniae Commentarius* (1632), a text in which the Catholic Archbishop had promoted O'Neill as the hero of the European Counter-Reformation, becoming thus central not only to Gaelic historiography, but also to the Nationalist tradition.

The whole text is structured on this opposition between the private and the public realms, the inner and the outer selves, and this doubleness is represented by dividing the stage space through the pairing of different characters. The domestic sphere of O'Neill's home in Dungannon places its dramatic emphasis on Hugh's relationship with Mabel, highlighting not only the private dimension in his life, but also a harmonious fusion of Gaelic and English tradition, which also "characterised the central love scene of *Translations*" (Kiberd, 1996: 634). Yet this world is intruded by the arrival of another pair of characters, Lombard and O'Donnell, coming as messengers of the public discourse of politics and tribal loyalties. Hugh O'Donnell's sensationalist report on the troubled scene surrounding Dungannon reveals a parochial and divided society, impetuous and unstable, in a permanent flux of shifting allegiances, as its Gaelic chieftains are, in Lombard's words: "Constantly at war - occasionally with the English - but always, always among themselves"(11). However, this is part of the same world of ancient rituals and ceremonies that O'Neill inherited at his birth, "a way of life that my blood comprehends and indeed loves and that is as old as the Book of Ruth"(28). While O'Donnell impersonates Hugh's attachments to his native culture, the presence of Lombard enlarges the public theme by placing it into the context of European politics. The Archbishop, "by profession . . . a Church diplomat"(6), is the emissary of the European Counter-Reformation, speaking the impersonal and abstract language of the organisers and ideologues. As a self-appointed chronicler of the Irish situation, he has already inserted Hugh in his text in the preordained public role of a hero:

*And this is a résumé of my Commentarius - a thesis I'm doing on the Irish situation. Briefly, my case is this. Because of her mismanagement England has forfeited her right to domination over this country. The Irish chieftains have been forced to take up arms in defence of their religion. And because of your birth, education and personal attributes, you are the natural leader of that revolt. (7-8)*

Despite Lombard's claim that "History has to be made - before it's remade"(9), the public discourse has imposed "a pattern on events that were mostly casual and haphazard" (8). O'Neill may ponder about his options and resist volunteering to appear in "the big canvas of national events" (69), but the course of his actions has been pre-ordered either by policy-makers such as Lombard, the Spanish grandees or the Pope, or by the polarised language of imperialistic imagery, which, despite his Renaissance self-fashioning under the guidance of Sir Henry Sydney, will inevitably brand him "Fox O'Neill", because all Irishmen "who live like subjects play but as the fox which when you have him on a chain will seem tame; but if he ever gets loose, he will be wild again" (35). Positioned as defender of "the Holy

Roman Church” (33) by the discourse of militant Catholicism and as the treacherous barbarian by that of colonialism, O’Neill is eventually forced to conform to his public role, and engage in “making” history, while the rupture of his bonds with his private self will be symbolised by the news of Mabel’s death.

Years later in Rome, with his official part formally ended by the full stop placed in Lombard’s history after “The Flight of the Earls. . . the final coming to rest”(65-66) and the position of “*inacción*” (56) assigned by the present political discourse, a broken, drunken and penniless O’Neill will be left with a crippled privacy, epitomised in the frustrating marriage to Catriona. The existent history of personal failure will be once more juxtaposed with Lombard’s story where the former public failure has been turned into a history of success. To become a “cause for celebration not only by us but by the generations that follow” (62), the narrative will delete Mabel, signifying both the private and the English dimension in Hugh’s existence, and will turn O’Neill’s life into a story of epic proportions where even the “telling” of the battle of Kinsale “can . . . be a triumph” (65).

Refusing to be imprisoned “in a florid lie” (63), O’Neill engages in his last and, this time, personal battle to retrieve the wholeness of his lived history, lost in the simplified narrative of Lombard’s book:

*I need the truth, Peter. That’s all that’s left. The schemer, the leader, the liar, the statesman, the lecher, the patriot, the drunk, the soured, bitter émigré - put it all in, Peter. Record the whole life. (63) (underlining mine)*

What Mabel has called the “overall thing”(68) means ultimately to reclaim the multiplicity of life, in its shifting patterns of opposite manifestations.

And *Making History* fights its own battle to regain the “overall thing”, by self-consciously fore-grounding the relativity of absolute categorisations. The glass of whiskey that Lombard holds in his hand may be both “a lure to perdition” and “a foretaste of immortality”(69). In a similar fashion, the oppositional terms of the colonial discourse resurface in various contexts and with subtle re-polarisations, in concordance with Friel’s dictum that a writer’s task is to acknowledge but not defer to established facts. While for the English Harry Bagenal, Mabel’s brother, the Irish will always be locked in their description as “a rebellious race”, “so traitorous a stock” that have to be repressed (6), and O’Donnell will be accordingly nicknamed “the Butcher O’Donnell” (17), truth is always made relative, and no definitions remain fixed. Bagenal, in his turn, becomes for Hugh O’Donnell “the Butcher Bagenal” (13), and his raids in the countryside, where he “slaughtered and beheaded fifteen families” are described by means of the same language with which O’Donnell boasts his own acts. Even Mabel, despite her openness to her husband’s culture, is not spared falling prey to the language of English prejudice and, irritated by her servants, shouts at them: “If you want to behave like savages, go back to the bogs!” (20). But seconds later in the play, faced with her sister’s retort to the convention trope of the uncivilised Irish, “treacherous and treasonable. . .steeped in religious superstitions”, “a savage people who refuse to cultivate the land God gave us” (24), Mabel crosses the border of the paradigm, and embarrasses her sister by asserting her conversion to Catholicism and relocating the terms of definition:

*As for civility I believe that there is a mode of life here that is at least as honourable and as cultivated as the life I’ve left behind. And I imagine the Cistercian monks in Newry didn’t think our grandfather an agent of civilisation when he routed them out of their monastery and took it over as our home. (24).*

Such ironic juxtaposition is a constant of a play which leaves no safe locations for pre-set oppositions. O'Neill himself may make ironic references to the "Gaelic wilderness" (26), the Italians may unexpectedly be conjured by O'Donnell to fill the negative term of the matrix: "Bloody savages! The only time they ever smile is when they're sinking a sword in you!" (32) and even the Spanish view of Elisabeth as "the Jezebel of the North" is comically reworked in Mary's report on the English calling O'Neill "The Northern Lucifer - the Great Devil - Beelzebub" (25).

O'Neill's mind has the versatility of understanding both codes and see the values and excesses on each side. On one hand, the Gaelic culture, stretching back "since before history, long before the God of Christianity was ever heard of" (40) lends assurances and dignity to his people. Yet, on the other hand, the same tradition can also entrap them "in the old Gaelic paradigms of thought" (27), and the proud defiance of the Irish, exemplified by the fate of Maguire, may become a suicidal action. Similarly, the English culture is equally the epitome of the enlightened Renaissance mind, the necessary implement "to open these peoples to the strange new ways of Europe, . . . ease them into the new assessment of things" (40) and that of crude materialism, because it also represents "the plodding Henrys of this world which are the real empire makers" (27).

Still, straddling both worlds, O'Neill proves by his own example that their reconciliation and fusion is possible, as long as the openness to the "other" is preserved, an openness also asserted by the meaningful relationships, be them of love or friendship, established with Mabel and O'Donnell. Moreover, the "Other" can be enriching, because, as Mabel says, his strength lies with him being both Irish and English, becoming thus "the most powerful man in Ireland" and an enigma to the Queen, "the antithesis of what she expects a Gaelic chieftain to be." (38)

The balance is broken the moment O'Neill is compelled to side with the Gaelic 'pieties' against his English half. Yet, despite severed attachments and amidst the rash of battle plans, Mabel's presence restores her husband to his characteristic "calculation - deliberation - caution" (37) Nonetheless, his carefully designed scheme of operations is nullified by the Spaniards' wrong choice of place, and O'Neill has the instant apprehension of the fore-coming defeat:

*O'Neill: Where do they land?*

*O'Donnell: 'Keen-sall.'*

*O'Neill: Where - where?*

*O'Donnell: 'Keen'sall' - Kinsale, I suppose.*

*O'Neill: Oh, God, no. (42)*

After the debacle of Kinsale the fiction of a nation state collapses into the "chaos" (44) of the former quagmire of "squabbling tribesmen" (38), and O'Neill is confronted once more with the imperative of opting between the Gaelic paradigm, represented now by his joining the "Flight of the Earls" and living "the life of a soured émigré whingeing and scheming round the capitals of Europe" (48), or the pragmatism of his Englishness, which tells him to follow Mabel's advice and submit to Elizabeth:

*I should accept almost any conditions, no matter how humiliating, as long as I'd be restored to my base again and to my own people (48).*

It is at this moment that O'Neill professes his loyalty to the English Crown and surrenders the last remnants of independence, but he does so fully aware of the consequences of this act, which would render him "one great fraud" (49) to both sides alike:

*O'Neill: Belief has nothing to do with it. As Mabel says, she'll use me if it suits her.  
O'Donnell: And your people?  
O'Neill: They're much more pure, "my people". Oh, no, they won't believe me either.  
But they'll pretend they believe me and then with ruthless Gaelic logic they'll crucify me  
for betraying them. (50)*

O'Neill's willed confession is done in full recognition that he will be forever considered an impostor, but it is the only reasonable response to the devious world around him, and becomes thus as important a chapter in his history as the other glorified events selected by Lombard's book:

*O'Neill: And the six years after Kinsale - before the Flight of the Earls - aren't they going to be recorded? When I lived like a criminal, skulking round the countryside - my countryside! - hiding from the English, from the Upstarts, from the Old English, but most assiduously hiding from my brother Gaels who couldn't wait to strip me out of every blade of grass I ever owned. And then when I could endure that humiliation no longer, I ran away! If these were 'my people' then to hell with my people! (66)*

All the same, this episode will be dismissed by the Archbishop as unfit for "the story of a hero" (67) and because, as Kiberd notes, "history is not written by winners or losers, but by historians" (Kiberd: 1996, 633), the final lines in the play will be given to Lombard to seal the divine stature of his character:

*A man, glorious, pure, faithful above all  
Who will cause mournful weeping in every territory.  
He will be a God-like prince  
And he will be king for the span of his life. (71)*

It is a truism that history depends upon the "the surviving documents, which are the past's versions of itself" (Friel, Barry, Andrews, 1983: 118). The large brown book placed centre-stage throughout the last scene, Lombard's *Commentarius*, is one such surviving record, freezing O'Neill into a messianic hero. But Friel's character breathes alive from the pages of this "imagined" narrative of his life precisely because it has replaced the repressive disjunctive co-ordination of the past with the liberating apposition. O'Neill can be a hero, as well as a famished refugee, as well as a deserter to his nation, as well as many other things in a play about multiple identity and dual forms of belonging that expose the shallowness of all stereotypes.

The challenge undertaken by the play, namely to bypass the authority of official texts by its own fiction has been resolved at the structural level, where the audience were tricked to dismiss as inauthentic the testimony of an approved document like Lombard's *Commentarius* by linking O'Neill's corrective reminiscences with their images, which had been actually enacted during the previous three scenes.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For the analysis of this play all references are made to Brian Friel, *Making History*, London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1989, hereafter cited parenthetically in the text.

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### Abstract

*Brian Friel's third original Field Day play, **Making History**, is indicative of the playwright's rejection of the oppositional binaries on which both the colonialist and the nationalist definitions of Irishness are based, and his search for a middle-ground, where the mechanics by which forms of identity are asserted and problematised may be subjected to a critical investigation. The paper aims to disclose the various strategies by means of which Friel's play continually brings such oppositional constructs into question and opens thus both the colonialist and the nationalist paradigms to critique.*

### Résumé

*La troisième pièce originale de Brian Friel pour la compagnie Field Day, **Making History**, témoigne de la rejection de l'auteur en ce qui concerne les paires de concepts opposés qui constituent l'essence des définitions colonialistes et nationales de l'identité du peuple d'Irlande, et de sa recherche pour une voie de compromise où la mécanique à travers de laquelle des formes d'identité sont exposées et mises en question peut faire l'objet d'une investigation critique. Cet étude a comme objet de révéler les stratégies différentes à l'aide desquelles la pièces de Friel met toujours en question de telles constructions opposées et elle ouvre également les paradigmes colonialistes et nationaux à la critique.*

### Rezumat

***Making History**, cea de-a treia piesa originală scrisă de Brian Friel pentru a fi produsă de compania teatrală Field Day, reia explorarea spațiului identității irlandeze în contextul revoltei lui Hugh O'Neill, unul dintre evenimentele cruciale din istoriei colonizării Irlandei. Lucrarea își propune să demonstreze că textul frielian rescrie narațiunea istorică în registru imaginativ unde modelele dihotomice de reprezentare a conceptului de Irishness, (caracteristice atât discursului colonialismului britanic cât și celui al naționalismului irlandez) pot fi destabilizate și revizuite. Un veritabil text postmodern, piesa aduce în centrul atenției suspiciunea față de narațiunile totalizatoare, accentuând natura discursivă a reprezentărilor trecutului și, implicit, a identității și subliniază instabilitatea, relativitatea și provizoratul acesteia.*