

In Between History and Historiography:
Hybrid Identity and the Discourse of the Nation in
Brian Friel's *Making History**

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I

Brian Friel believes that neither in dramatic fiction nor in history do facts speak for themselves: it is the tellers who speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. Who the tellers are and why they tell their stories are, therefore, of paramount importance. Tellers and chroniclers of history in Ireland have been so inextricably bound with the politics of the divided nation that their stories, whether nationalist or revisionist, are all totalizing and at the same time fractured representations of the people of Ireland.

Friel's project in *Translations* was one of recovery--stitching back into the torn fabric of Irish history the displaced figures from an (imagined) Irish rural community of Ballybeg. The playwright was also keen to demonstrate the

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inadequacy of nationalist historiography as the mode of retrieving those displaced figures. The masterful interplay at work between regret and irony in *Translations*, between its belated lament for a lost culture and its strenuous efforts to highlight that culture's inertia and malaise, allows the play to transcend the confinement of the powerful yet simplistic nationalist sentiment so as to delve into complex national conditions and dissect them. If in *Translations* Friel wanted, to borrow Roy Foster's memorable phrase,¹⁾ to "rescue figures adrift in history's flood, and salvage a sense of belonging" ("Something of Us" 196), it may be said that his intention in *Making History* is to test history's waters about the possibility of rescuing at all. Friel's attempt to set his drama against historical imperatives in *Translations* turns into a trenchant critique of Irish historiography in *Making History*.

In this paper, I propose to see *Making History* as a play which, in the course of dissecting the conflicting views of history that have had divisive and alienating effects on the Irish people in both the south and the north, ultimately rejects the self-claim of historiography to our access to the past. Historiography has no more validity to it than dramatic fiction when it comes to remembering the past and representing it. An important corollary to the issue of the representation of the past is the problem of establishing Irish identity in the midst of the radically opposing views in Irish historiography on the nature and development of the Irish nation. Thus, another thematic feature in *Making History* centers on the essentially hybridized nature of Irish identity and how it comes to be suppressed and homogenized by the discourse of the nation. The discourse of the nation, however, is never pure or fully successful in self-purification and, as *Making History* shows, the Irish national discourse is

1) Foster's phrase is originally intended for the plays of another Irish playwright, Sebastian Barry.

itself a contingent product of the hybridization between Roman Catholicism, which was set against England's Protestantism, and Irish tribalism that was mobilized for colonial struggle against England's imperial design.

Friel's dramatic locus in *Making History* is found in his critique of the nationalist discourse. This is an act of balancing on Friel's part: since the premier of Friel's own *Translations* in 1980, the Field Day Theatre Company has been widely regarded, especially by Northern Irish critics, as the hotbed of the renewed cultural manifestation of nationalist aspirations (Lee 151-59). This, however, does not mean that Friel has turned toward embracing the revisionist view of Irish history. This either-or situation in Irish historical discourse is precisely that which Friel's Field Day plays, from *Translations* to *Making History*, attempt to dramatize and overcome. After *Making History*, which dramatizes how the discourse of the nation first came to fragment the hybrid identity of Irish people, then select some of the fragments and finally construct the single unified Irish identity, Friel would eventually turn against historiography and move toward the dramatization of personal memory as the site of his dramatic inquiry.

II

As the title suggests, *Making History* deals with the question of who makes history. The dichotomy between the acts of individuals that constitute history and the representation of those acts and individuals in historical writing is the major theme of the play. *Making History* is also a play about how history comes into being. For Friel, the poetry of the Irish past that weighs like a nightmare on the Irish mind emanates from the radical polarization of Irish

historiography, roughly corresponding to the political contour of Ireland: the nationalist and revisionist discourses. To put it schematically, the nationalist discourse traces modern Irish history as one continuous and often frustrated struggle in the span of four centuries against the English colonial oppression. On the other hand, the revisionist discourse sees Irish history as a series of unstable and discontinuous yet constructive and often advantageous negotiations and coexistence with a neighboring superpower.

In the nationalist historical discourse, the eventual liberation and independence of Ireland from England, through the rising of 1916 and the ensuing War of Independence, is still incomplete because the “nation” of Ireland remains partitioned, with the northern parts of Ireland still under British colonial rule. The struggle against the colonial oppression must keep going until the genuinely independent and fully unified Ireland comes into existence. At the start of this nationalist view of Irish modern history we find the first “national” hero of the Irish people, Hugh O’Neill, and it is O’Neill who keeps turning up as a legendary hero in Irish historical memory.

Irish historical revisionism also takes the historical moment surrounding O’Neill and the Battle of Kinsale as a watershed of Irish modern history. However, in the revisionist discourse, O’Neill, instead of being a dedicated patriot, appears as an adept politician and gifted soldier who constantly managed to negotiate his political position between Ireland and the Elizabethan England and made the most of limited resources in a period of turbulent social change. It is argued, for instance, that during the crucial period of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, “many Irish residents, including a significant number of native Irish leaders, were happy to accept British rule and kingship,” and this has in turn led many historians to cast a suspecting eye over the portrait of Hugh O’Neill as “a clear-cut exemplar of Irish nationalism”

(Daly 100).

Therefore, *Making History* is also a play about who defines the nation and national identity. Historiography becomes the contesting field of various definitions of the nation and multiple forms of national identity. By re-imagining crucial moments in O'Neill's life, Friel intends to confront both the nationalist and revisionist historical discourses and further to dispute the exclusive claim of historiography to our past. What Fredric Jameson finds in Benjamin's work--"a painful straining toward a psychic wholeness or unity of experience which the historical situation threatens to shatter at every turn" (61)--also has a powerful presence in Friel's attempt to redeem Hugh O'Neill who has been constantly subject to the mythicization and the subsequent historical canonization. Furthermore, the redemption of the individual from history, for Friel, doesn't necessarily have to be hortatory or denigrating in that the individuality that historical categorizing or typifying tends to suppress or even erase need not be couched in moral terms and thus defined in terms of good and evil.

The last play Friel wrote for his own Derry-based Field Day Theatre Company,²⁾ *Making History* dramatizes the life of the sixteenth-century Earl of Tyrone, Hugh O'Neill, the central figure in this key period in Irish history with the fall of the Gaelic aristocracy and the subsequent acceleration of Ulster plantation.³⁾ The fact that *Making History* would prove to be Friel's last play for the Field Day Theatre Company is suggestive of his profoundly ambivalent

2) The Field Day Theatre Company, since its founding in 1980, had been at the center of Irish reception of, and experiment with, post-colonial theory.

3) For many historians, O'Neill's defeat at Kinsale and the subsequent "Flight of the Earls" effectively mark the English conquest of Ireland and the beginning of modern Ireland (Moody and Martin 125-38; Foster, *Modern Ireland*).

relationship with Irish postcolonial criticism that had recently come into prominence in Irish academia mainly through the efforts by Irish cultural nationalists. In 1986, Roy Foster, the Oxford historian who occupies the only chair in Irish history in any British universities, published an article entitled “We Are All Revisionists Now” in which he celebrated the farewell to the dangerous nostalgia of nationalist history. The most vocal and articulate opponent of this view has been Seamus Deane who, as the general editor of Field Day publications, advocated the postcolonial model for the Irish experience. Under his editorship, Edward Said published his Field Day pamphlet called “Yeats and Decolonization” in 1988, the same year Friel’s *Making History* was staged. Said’s pamphlet has been published together with Terry Eagleton’s and Fredric Jameson’s under the title of *Nationalism, Colonialism, and Literature*.

The major historical source of Hugh O’Neill’s life on which Friel bases his drama is Sean O’Faolain’s *The Great O Neill*, first published in 1942. It is interesting that at the end of the preface to his book, O’Faolain wrote that “a talented dramatist might write an informative, entertaining, ironical play on the theme of the living man helplessly watching his translation into a star in the face of all the facts that had reduced him to poverty, exile, and defeat” (vi). Although there have been plays written around the Hugh O’Neill figure before such as Thomas Kilroy’s *The O Neill* (1969), Friel’s *Making History* is the first and most fully realized play that takes up O’Faolain’s suggestion. As Sean Connolly points out, O’Faolain’s book was the first in Irish historiography which set out to demolish the nationalist myth of O’Neill as a legendary leader who, after his formative years in England, was to reveal his true self as the patriotic rebel and would one day lead his people in a war of liberation against the oppressors. O’Neill, as portrayed by O’Faolain, was “a supreme pragmatist,

exploiting both English government and Gaelic tradition until events upset the equilibrium he had created” (Connolly 160). Therefore, *The Great O'Neill* in Connolly’s assessment “provides not only the raw material for *Making History*, but also a clear outline of its theme” (160).

Connolly’s is essentially a historian’s view which misses out some of the more deeply embedded concerns of Friel’s drama. The point Friel is trying to make is not whether a historical perspective or point of view is superior to another. That is, the historical debate on whether O’Neill should be viewed as a supreme pragmatist or a dedicated patriot is not only a moot point in itself but also wide of the mark in Friel’s dramatic concerns. Nor is the playwright particularly concerned with the Foucauldian problem of how one historical discourse comes to take dominance over others. What is at stake for Friel is how to retrieve the social space in which “interpret[ing] between privacies” (*Translations* 90) becomes a genuine possibility and so does “the exploration of the dark and private places of individual souls” (*Brian Friel* 77). And the answer to the problem Friel grapples with is predicated upon constructing social subjectivity which can escape from being effaced by history or resist sweeping historical narratives that forcibly impose an artificially homogenized identity on it. The problem of the binary opposition between the private and the public, between the individual and society, and between memory and history becomes exacerbated when the formation of social subjectivity takes place in the colonial context.

In what is probably the first portrayal and thus prototype of the “Stage Irishman” in English literature, Shakespeare gives us in *Henry V* a fascinating characterization of an Irish captain named Macmorris. When a Welsh captain named Fluellen tells him there are not many soldiers from his nation to fight the battle, Macmorris immediately bursts out: “Of my nation? What ish my

nation? Ish a villain / and a bastard and a knave and a rascal? What ish my / nation? Who talks of my nation?" (3.3.63-65). With his national pride hurt, Macmorris threatens to kill the Welsh captain. Shakespeare's only Irish character shows "those traits of excitability, eloquence, pugnacity and strong national pride which would later become the stock-in-trade of the Stage Irishman" (Kiberd 21). The point, though, is that Macmorris is fiercely loyal to the English king, but at the same time he is immensely proud of his Irish nation.

An anecdote of 1599 relates the rueful remark by one of Essex's Irish captains: "I am sorry that when I am in England, I should be esteemed an Irishman, and in Ireland, an Englishman" (qtd. in Shakespeare 169: note 63). Earl of Essex, a long-time favorite of the Queen and appointed lieutenant and governor-general of Ireland, was ordered to suppress the rebellion that had been spreading with alarming speed in Ireland. He failed miserably, thanks in large part to the skillful political manipulation and the war tactics of skirmishes by the leader of the rebellion, who was none other than Hugh O'Neill. It was Mountjoy, successor to Essex, who eventually succeeded in defeating Tyrone's forces in the Battle of Kinsale in 1603 (Moody and Martin 149-51). If Shakespeare's *Henry V* can be said to give us "a fleeting glance at an Irishman" (Kiberd 21) from the English point of view, Friel in *Making History* attempts to create a fully rounded portrayal of an Irishman at the turn of the sixteenth century from the Irish point of view.

In the play, Friel focuses on O'Neill's hybrid identity as hereditary Gaelic chief and as Earl of Tyrone, by the Grace of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth of England. In fact, the divided loyalty O'Neill was later to exploit so effectively for his own political purpose for many years had been a common lot for many an Irish colonized subject. In addition to O'Neill's hybrid identity as hereditary

Gaelic chief and as Earl of Tyrone, his marriage to Mabel Bagenal, a Protestant and the sister of the Queen's Marshal, suggests a further, very intimate, English influence. While part of the play dramatizes O'Neill's dilemma, his reluctant decision, the defeat at Kinsale and the subsequent exile known as the Flight of the Earls, another plot line concentrates on the task Archbishop Lombard has set himself, the writing of Hugh's life as a national myth for the benefit and enlightenment of future generations.

In the program notes to *Making History*, Friel introduces a short explanatory statement on the relationship between his dramatic fiction and historiography:

Making History is a dramatic fiction that uses some actual and some imagined events in the life of Hugh O'Neill to make a story. I have tried to be objective and faithful--after my artistic fashion--to the empirical method. But where there was tension between historical 'fact' and the imperative of the fiction, I'm glad to say I kept faith with the narrative. For example, even though Mabel, Hugh's wife, died in 1591, it suited my story to keep her alive for another ten years. Part of me regrets taking these occasional liberties. But then I remind myself that history and fiction are related and comparable forms of discourse and that an historical text is a kind of literary artifact. And then I am grateful that these regrets were never inhibiting. (*Brian Friel* 135)

This seems, at face value, to be a duplication of the remarks that Friel made in defense of his use and manipulation of historical facts in *Translations*. However, whereas in *Translations* the tension between historical representation and dramatic enactment has been kept as such without subjecting one to the other, Friel in *Making History* defiantly equates history to "a kind of literary artifact," thus positing the authority of fiction as a governing principle in both

historical writing and literary writing. As a consequence, the play has been widely accepted not just as a history play, that is, a play set in the past, but, more to the point, as “a play about history itself” (Connolly 149).⁴⁾

Friel’s assertion that history and fiction are “comparable forms of discourse” is not as outrageously self-serving as it may seem. As a matter of fact, it echoes the renowned historian Hayden White’s claim in *Tropics of Discourse*: “the techniques or strategies that [historians and imaginative writers] use in the composition of their discourses can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface, or dictional, level” (121). As White also points out in *The Content of the Form*, narrative historians agree that historical narrative differs little from fictional writing in form: both are imaginative constructions. The difference, it is said, lies in the fact that “[t]he content of historical stories is real events, events that really happened, rather than imaginary events, events invented by the narrator” (27). However, this radical separation in the narrative of content and form is itself imaginary, for “real events” cannot be directly observed and described objectively by historians but are the sources processed by historians’ mental constructions.

Furthermore, the sources are themselves several times removed from their origin and should be accorded no special historical authority. As another historian observes:

Nor do the sources ‘speak for themselves.’ If for us [historians] the concept of value-free history is a chimera, so is the idea of a value-free-source, for these ‘sources,’ in our field, are largely also

4) Even the back-cover blurb of Faber’s edition of the play contains the phrase “a play about history.”

histories, and as prone to personal, political and ethical bias as our own (indeed, in the latter case even more so). (Cameron 87).

Indeed, as much as dramatists need to have historical information, so do historians require literary imagination. As White argues, “[o]ne can produce an imaginary discourse about real events that may not be less ‘true’ for being imaginary” because after all the truth of narrative depends on “how one construes the function of the faculty of imagination in human nature” (Content 57). Once it is accepted that history is a narrative form requiring the imaginative capacity, the distinction between what is true and what is false begins to thin out. Therefore, White concludes, “the fact that narrative is the mode of discourse common to both ‘historical’ and ‘nonhistorical’ cultures and that it predominates in both mythic and fictional discourse makes it suspect as a manner of speaking ‘real’ events” (Content 57). With those words, White clearly points not only to the trappings of scientific pretensions of “historical culture” but, more importantly, to the impossibility of representing the reality as it is, with the resulting proximity between literature and history as the imaginative (re)creation of the reality.

III

“Another history! Jesus, if we had as many scones of bread as we have historians!” (52), thus says Red Hugh O’Donnell, in the first scene of Act Two of *Making History*, in response to Harry Hoveden who has just returned from home, reporting on what was happening at home and mentioning, in passing, an O Cianain writing a history of some sort. Harry, an Englishman and Hugh

O'Neill's private secretary, then reveals the crushing news that both Mabel, O'Neill's wife, and their baby died during birth giving. Near the end of the play, Archbishop Peter Lombard, who has been writing a biography of O'Neill, says:

In the big canvas of national event--in your exchanges with popes and kings and queens--is that where Mabel herself thought her value and her importance resided? Is that how she saw herself? But she had her own value, her own importance. And at some future time and in a mode we can't imagine now I have no doubt that story will be told fully and sympathetically. It will be a domestic story, Hugh; a love story; and a very beautiful story it will be. But in the overall thing, Hugh . . . How many heroes can one history accommodate? (69)

Lombard knows that his nationalist vision is reductive of O'Neill's multifaceted life but he justifies his project in terms of the absolute necessity for creating national types that can provide the oppressed people of Ireland with guidelines for their anti-colonial resistance and fighting. However, this is not the whole story, as Lombard clearly makes his political moves according to the direct orders from Rome which sees the great necessity of mobilizing Irish national sentiment for containing the spread of English Protestantism.

In the opening scene of the play, Lombard first suggests that history writing is objective, without the historian's personal, political and ethical biases and agendas interfering with the process of the writing: as he says, the historian's job is to "[n]ot interpret, Hugh. Just describe" (8). In other words, history does have meaning which exists apart from and prior to the consciousness and intellect of the historian and that a meaning is totally intelligible and discernable to him: history is there for the historian to grab.

However, an act of describing can never be total not only for sheer physical enormity of information but, more fundamentally, in the sense of the language's innate lack of intentional transparency: "All descriptions are partial. We speak less than the truth, we fragment in order to reconstruct desired alternatives, we select and elide. It is not 'the things which are' that we say, but those which might be, which we would bring about, which the eye and remembrance compose" (Steiner 231). No wonder Friel quotes affirmingly in his program notes to *Making History* Oscar Wilde's bitingly witty statement from *The Critic as Artist*: "To give an accurate description of what has never happened is not merely the proper occupation of the historian, but the inalienable privilege of any man of arts and culture" (Brian Friel 135).

Therefore, Friel has Lombard contradict himself immediately by revealing the ideological underpinnings of historiography. He tells O'Neill that the first and foremost responsibility of the historian is "to tell the best possible narrative" because history is "a kind of story-telling" (8). The subsumption of history under narrative art in turn means that it is about "[i]mposing a pattern on events that were mostly casual and haphazard and shaping them into a narrative that is logical and interesting" (8). In this view, reality is not something always already made and given to be comprehended, but only a mass of formless materials to be selected and ordered by the human mind and language. The "sources" on which historians rely for their histories are already products of creative imagination. Furthermore, selecting the sources and ordering them into narrative form are an individual act and cannot by any means be done objectively. It follows that history is made not just by the doer but more precisely by the writer. We are unable to experience the past by participating in the making of it, and "by far the greatest mass of the past as we experience it is a verbal construct" (Steiner 30).

History indeed is an act of translation, seeking to translate deed into word. According to George Steiner, whose *After Babel* has cast a huge influence on Friel's thinking:

History is a speech-act, a selective use of the past tense. . . . We have no total history, no history which could be defined as objectively real because it contained the literal sum of past life. To remember everything is a condition of madness. We remember culturally, as we do individually, by conventions of emphasis, foreshortening, and omission . . . the reality of felt history in a community depend[s] on a never-ending, though very often unconscious, act of internal translation. (30)

History then becomes an open field in which different narratives vie with each other for the foregrounding of its own "overall thing." In short, history effectively is an ideological battlefield. As Lombard retorts on O'Neill who wants the truth to be told in his history, "I don't believe that a period of history . . . contains within it one 'true' interpretation just waiting to be mined. But I do believe that it may contain within it several possible narratives" (15).

What, then, is "the overall thing" that binds and orders casual and haphazard events, giving "a cohesion to that random catalogue of deliberate achievement and sheer accident" (67)? It could be anything from personal vendetta, hagiographic adulation, debunking the myth, belief in Christian teleology, and so on. For Lombard, "the overall thing" that gives a cohesion to his narrative is his own nationalist imperative: "Now is the time for a hero. . . . And I'm offering them Hugh O'Neill as a national hero . . . there are times when a hero can be as important to a people as a God" (67). He wants Ireland to be a replica of England which is "a nation state that is united and determined and powerful and led by a very resolute woman" (38). He sees the

rebellion of Gaelic chieftains against England as the moment of history-making at which “suddenly the nation state was becoming a reality” (64), even though the real nature of the unified Gaelic nation, Friel seems to suggest, may be closer to what Mabel calls “an impromptu alliance of squabbling tribesmen” (38).

Unlike Lombard, O’Neill believes that the truth about a person can be revealed not through filtered stereotyping but only when the totality of his or her whole experiences is told. For O’Neill, Lombard’s history which narrates his life from the single continuous point of view as “a national hero” (67) distorts and falsifies his true nature, reducing multifarious and often contradictory experiences of a lifetime to a one-dimensional type, however heroic and inspiring that may be. O’Neill is also acutely aware of his many conflicting identities, and his whole life has been a series of contingent negotiations between his many different selves. Mabel knows this as nobody else does: “You inch forward--you withdraw. You challenge--you retreat. You defy--you submit” (37-38). O’Neill tells Lombard that he has been “[t]he schemer, the leader, the liar, the statesman, the lecher, the patriot, the drunk, the soured, bitter emigre” and he wants Lombard to “put it all in” and “[r]ecord the whole life” (63). Of course, not everything can be told by history or, as for that matter, by literature. Even if it were possible, as the hedge-school master Hugh O’Donnell tells in *Translations*, “[t]o remember everything is a form of madness” (88).

However, what is omitted and thus not told is as important as what is included and thus remembered. First and foremost among many stories that will make up his history, O’Neill wants the story of Mabel to be told: “Can I trust you to make Mabel central?” (63). However, O’Neill’s marital relationship with his English wife is only “a domestic story” and therefore doesn’t fit Lombard’s

purpose. Love's loss and the pain of personal regret are not the subject of history writing which should instead concentrate on "the big canvass of national event." They may be relegated more properly to dramatic art. More importantly, because he doesn't say so, Lombard wants to make sure that his story of the great patriotic leader is not tainted by the fact that the wife of the national hero is an English and a Protestant, a pagan colonialist.

Even when considering O'Neill only as political leader, Lombard fails to see O'Neill's double-edged desire to hold the nation together and open it to multicultural influences. As O'Neill tells Mabel with "the controlled passion":

I have spent my life attempting to do two things. I have attempted to hold together a harassed and confused people by trying to keep them in touch with the life they knew before they were overrun. It wasn't a life of material ease but it had assurances and it had its dignity. And I have done that by acknowledging and indeed honouring the rituals and ceremonies and beliefs these people have practised since before history, long before the God of Christianity was ever heard of. And at the same time I have tried to open these people to the strange new ways of Europe, to ease them into the new assessment of things, to nudge them towards changing evaluations and beliefs. (40)

O'Neill knows that the two tasks he sets himself up to are almost impossible to accomplish simultaneously, that they are "almost self-cancelling": to preserve tradition and open up the nation to the modernity of European civilization. Nevertheless, "they have got to be attempted because the formation of nations and civilizations is a willed act, not a product of fate or accident" (40). O'Neill's objectives are both political and cultural: he is concerned not only with establishing a nation-state but also with being an active participant in, if

not a creator of, a civilization. Lombard misses out the cultural dimension of O'Neill's ambition: his deeply felt need to establish a (multi)cultural, hybridized form of Irish identity.

All this is surely the present Ireland wrapped in disguise and refracted onto the past: it reflects the central concern Friel has for Ireland where politicians and historians, under the duress of their embattled and hardened discourses void of any imagination, are stuck eternally in the political impasse. Cultural re-imagination may yet provide the key to resolving the contradiction of the two Irelands. Cultural re-imagining in turn is predicated upon the construction of some form of hybridized Irish identity. Interestingly, Friel doesn't consider the possibility of reconciling the two opposing historical discourses. Instead, he chooses, as it seems the only choice considering the tenacity of the opposition, to reject historiography as such as unable, because too deeply entrenched in the political interest, to offer alternative ways of thinking about the future.

IV

As Ernest Renan in his celebrated essay "What Is a Nation?" has astutely observed, "[f]orgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation" (11). As much as the battle of Kinsale, as constructed by Lombard, will be remembered, as it has indeed been, as the original point and symbol of a long battle of the Irish nation against the English colonial rule, the story of Mabel will be effaced from Lombard's nationalist history and thus be forgotten by future generations. In this sense, Friel's *Making History* is an act of remembering Mabel after four hundred years of historical amnesia.

Both *Translations* and *Making History* are the products of Friel's involvement with the Field Day Theatre Company, which is designed to deal more or less with "the Troubles."⁵⁾ The adequacy of a postcolonial model for Ireland has been hotly debated thanks in large part to its geographic location in Europe and the racial character of the Irish people.⁶⁾ In a widely popular introductory text on postcolonial literatures with its famous title, *The Empire Writes Back*, the authors even maintain that "[w]hile it is possible to argue that these [Irish, Welsh, and Scottish] societies were the first victims of English expansion, their subsequent complicity in the British imperial enterprise makes it difficult for colonized peoples outside Britain to accept their identity as post-colonial" (32-33). By the same token, the specificity of Ireland has led a prominent Irish cultural critic to comment wryly that "Ireland is a First World country with a Third World memory" (Gibbons 3) and another to call the Irish postcolonial situation "anomalous" (Lloyd ix).

The status of Northern Ireland has caused even sharper division among Irish historians and theorists in the light of its political and constitutional

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- 5) "The Troubles" refers to a period of ethno-political conflict in Northern Ireland which spilled over at various times into Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The duration of the Troubles is conventionally dated from the late 1960s to the late 1990s, and, specifically, to the Belfast Agreement of 1998. The principal issues at stake in the Troubles were the constitutional status of Northern Ireland and the relationship between the mainly-Protestant Unionist and mainly-Catholic Nationalist communities in Northern Ireland.
- 6) The adequacy of the term "postcolonial" in *any* context at all has been questioned by McClintock and Shohat, who both criticize the ahistorical and apolitical nature of "postcolonial" discourses. For an attempt to theorize postcolonialism in terms of "oppositional postcolonialism" with its emancipatory politics and "complicit postcolonialism" with its "guilty" association with postmodernism, see Mishra and Hodge.

proximity with Great Britain. Anne McClintock, in her discussion of the pitfalls of the term “postcolonialism,” points to Northern Irish experiences as part of the evidence of the term’s inadequacy to cover a wide variety of national experiences: “Ireland may, at a pinch, be ‘post-colonial,’ but for the inhabitants of British-occupied Northern Ireland, not to mention the Palestinian inhabitants of the Israeli Occupied Territories and the West Bank, there may be nothing ‘post’ about colonialism at all” (87). Friel had been born and brought up in Northern Ireland in a Catholic minority and nationalist culture and later in the sixties moved across the border into the south. No doubt this personal background has significantly influenced his dramatic outlook.

Not only is Ireland a country with a fractured, colonial past, but the past continues into the present in Northern Ireland. Friel, like many others, has two home places and no home at the same time: he is an exile in his own country. Unfortunately, however, practically the only political agency, namely the IRA, which had the resolve and will to overcome this contradiction has been irrevocably tainted with horrible violence and equally violent retaliations uncalled for by the Irish people, South or North. As David Lloyd admits, “[w]ith the possible exception of greenness, no quality has more frequently and repetitiously been attributed to Ireland than violence” (124). In the political context of the divided Ireland, Fanon’s voice, instead of embodying a revolutionary discourse, has translated into pure violence. Therefore Robert Young asks: “Why has there never been a comparable theorization of the politics of violence in Ireland to Fanon’s analysis of the fundamental role of violence in colonial Algeria?” (299). The answer, Young suggests, should be found in the meager position that socialist discourse has enjoyed in Ireland. Young goes on to argue that the revolutionary socialist voice of James Connolly, who was killed in the 1916 Rising, should be recuperated as the

Irish counterpart of Fanon. Having seen through the cul-de-sac of political violence, Friel came to realize that the resolution of the Irish political impasse must be accompanied by and based upon a radical reformulation of Irish cultural identity and the aesthetic endeavor to articulate the reformulation (Kearney 83).

In Friel's drama, the identity of the subject is almost invariably defined in terms of its proximity to or distance from time and space. Thus, for example, the self-identity of Mabel in *Making History* changes as the time and space of her residence changes: at the end of the first scene of Act 1, Mabel is having a difficult time adjusting to her new Irish home which is only fifty miles from her old English home. She assures O'Neill that she will very soon get accustomed to her new environment, saying "I'll be all right. Just give me time. We're a tough breed, the Upstarts" (18). However, only a half page later, she promises O'Neill not to cry again: "Never again. Ever. We're a tough breed, the O'Neills" (19). The fluid mobility of Mabel's self-identification from "the Upstarts" to "the O'Neills" should be seen less as fulfilling the young woman's Oedipal desire for an authoritarian male figure and more as mirroring the ambivalent hybrid identity of O'Neill as hereditary Gaelic chief and as Earl of Tyrone. In other words, Friel suggests that only between the subjects of an unstabilized, negotiable identity is it possible to have a genuinely human relationship, to "interpret between privacies." As long as a singularly fixed identity is forced upon the subject, as long as subjects relate to each other through only a fragment of their identities--would that be "[t]he schemer, the leader, the liar, the statesman, the lecher, the patriot, the drunk, the soured, bitter emigre" (63)--no truly meaningful intersubjectivity can be established.

In this respect, the dramatic opposition between O'Neill and Lombard and the subsequent triumph of Lombard's history over O'Neill's life stories take on

a renewed significance. As Benedict Anderson's influential study on the origin and spread of nationalism, *Imagined Communities*, has shown, anti-colonial nationalism is itself shaped and formulated by the political and historical discourse of European nation states. Lombard's monological discourse against England from the Catholic nationalist viewpoint is in effect the mirror reflection of the imperial power he is so opposed to. In other words, his version of nationalism expresses the colonial subject's desire to be like the "Other." Both the omission of Mabel's story and the reduction of O'Neill's manifold identity to the single unified one of a national hero in Lombard's history represent the pitfalls of historical discourse per se and not just the nationalist version of it.

This is not to say that O'Neill was a helpless victim of the ruthless logic of history. O'Neill was first and foremost a politician with the taste for power. Lombard's history would not have been possible without O'Neill's collusion and his desire to be written into history. As Seamus Heaney points out, "[i]t is because Hugh O'Neill connives in what he knows to be an inauthentic story of his life being propounded by Peter Lombard that he weeps and asks forgiveness of the dead Mabel Bagenal at the end of *Making History*" (235). Political ambition is as guilty as historical desire of distorting and manipulating facts to suit one's purpose.

In the end, history is as much about forgetting as it is about remembering. It is about mapping in temporal linearity of selective experiences and about imposing a causal order of those selected experiences. Thanks to its forgetting as well as remembering, history is a narrative art, "a kind of story-telling" as Lombard admits. As a narrative, however, it needs an ideological thread through which all those separate and disparate beads of human experience are bound together. This "overall thing," quintessential for Lombard's history, is precisely that which covers up and effaces the "stories"

of Mabel Bagenal and Hugh O'Neill. Neither of them admits to knowing what "the overall thing" consists in and of. Mabel says "I really don't understand the overall thing," to which O'Neill replies: "The overall thing--we don't even begin to know what it means" (39). Thus *Making History* is something other and more than either a history play or a play about history. It is a play about "unmaking" history, a play that turns against history, or History, in search of the time and space for exploring the possibility of the relationship between the subjects of non-homogenized, unfixed and always negotiable identities.

V

In his discussion of *Making History* and *Dancing at Lughnasa*, Fintan O'Toole has averred that "Brian Friel does not write history plays, but plays that mock history" (202). Perhaps mocking is far too strong and sweeping a word for a playwright who has throughout his life grappled with the unrealistic hopes and oppressive burdens of history on Irish lives and identities. As we have seen, Friel believes that neither in dramatic fiction nor in history do facts speak for themselves. It is the tellers who speak for them, making these fragments of the past into a discursive whole. Therefore, it matters who the tellers are and why they tell stories. In Ireland more than any other country, tellers and chroniclers of the nation's past have been so inextricably bound with the sectarian politics that regardless of their political loyalties, the stories they tell are all totalizing and at the same time fractured representations of the people of Ireland. From now on, Friel, without losing a sense of history, would turn his attention away from historical subjects and periods and set his subsequent plays in that equally ambiguous time zone of the present.⁷⁾ The

Ballybeg of *Translations* would also become a more sparsely populated, abstract and timeless space of *Wonderful Tennessee* and *Molly Sweeney*, not far from that which Estragon and Vladimir inhabit. Also memory, not history, becomes the object for his dramatization.

In “Between Memory and History,” his introduction to the massive project of *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, Pierre Nora asserts that memory and history are two contending forms that lay claim on our remembrance of the past. History is made necessary when people no longer live in continuity with their past in memory. The need for written documents to the past arises when people become conscious of the radical disjunction between past and present, of the pastness of the past. With what Nora calls “the acceleration of history” we are confronted with “the brutal realization” of the difference between memory and history and the “conquest and eradication of memory by history” in modern times (8). What Nora is pointing at is the irony that the more the past is recorded and kept in history, the less we remember the past: “The less memory is experienced from the inside the more it exists only through its exterior scaffolding and outward signs” (13). The exteriorization of memory in history books and memorials closes off the space for the internalization of memory. To recuperate memory which has been usurped by history, it is necessary to revive the oral tradition which has long been replaced by written literature. The opposition between orality and literacy can be overcome by dramatic performance, which combines orality and literacy and speech and writing.

7) An exception is *The Home Place*, first performed in 2005. The play is set in the year of 1878 and deals with the demise of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy on the eve of the Land War. In general, it is difficult not to think of it as the 75 year-old playwright’s tired knock at history’s door in the old familiar Chekhovian way.

After *Making History*, Friel was soon to break up with Stephen Rea and distance himself from the Field Day affairs including its cultural politics led, among others, by that staunch postcolonial critic and nationalist, Seamus Deane. *Making History* turned out to be the last work Friel wrote for the Field Day Theatre Company. Frustrated by the internal politics of Field Day as well as the political impasse of Northern Ireland, Friel would turn his eyes back from the artistic hinterland of Derry to the Dublin-based Abbey Theatre, the stronghold of Irish dramatic tradition and the home of Lady Gregory, Yeats, Synge and the Irish Literary Theatre. The Abbey is where most of Friel's plays in the 1970s, including *The Freedom of the City*, *Volunteers*, *Living Quarters* and *Aristocrats*, were staged. However, the spatial and temporal transition in Friel's dramatic world from *Translations* and *Making History* to *Dancing at Lughnasa*, and the concomitant change in dramatic form from stage realism to poetic dream-work, are not just the result of his frustration with the politics of the Field Day Theatre Company and of Northern Ireland. It is also the consequence of his careful and rigorous experimentation with formal and thematic hybridization and with a subtle and imaginative reconstruction of memory outside historical time.

Key Words Brian Friel, *Making History*, O'Neill, Hybrid Identity, The Discourse of the Nation, Historiography

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In Between History and Historiography:
Hybrid Identity and the Discourse of the Nation
in Brian Friel's *Making History*

Abstract

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In this paper, I propose to see *Making History* as a play which, in the course of dissecting the conflicting views of history that have had divisive and alienating effects on the Irish people in both the south and the north, ultimately rejects the self-claim of historiography to our access to the past. Another important thematic feature of the play centers on the hybridized nature of Irish identity and how it comes to be suppressed and homogenized by the discourse of the nation. The discourse of the nation, however, is never pure or fully successful in self-purification and, as *Making History* shows, the Irish national discourse is itself a contingent product of the hybridization between Roman Catholicism, which was set against England's Protestantism, and Irish tribalism that was mobilized for colonial struggle against England's imperialism. In dramatizing how the discourse of the nation first came to fragment the hybrid identity of Irish people, then select some fragments and finally construct the single unified Irish identity, Friel ultimately turns against historiography and moves toward the dramatization of personal memory as the site of his dramatic inquiry. *Making History*, in short, is a play about "unmaking" history, a play that turns against history, or History, in search of the time and space for exploring the possibility of the relationship between the subjects of non-homogenized, unfixed and always negotiable identities.

Key Words Brian Friel, *Making History*, O'Neill, Hybrid Identity, The Discourse of the Nation, Historiography

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